RUSTLERS ON THE LOOSE

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FRANK C. ROBERTSON

A Wild West Story



PUBLISHED BY COLLINS

Adventure in the West

When Bill Dysart died the DX was the best cattle outfit on the range. But soon after that "Pig" Bratton arrived in the country and ever since the DX, along with the rest of the old outfits, had been going downhill, while Bratton's holdings increased by leaps and bounds. It was hard for young Jim Dysart to make good. Then came the black day when the DX lost nearly two hundred head, and Jim realised that rustlers were operating on a big scale. It was time to saddle and ride, not on the everyday job of cattle-herding but on the trail of rustlers, all of them armed and desperate men. The future of the DX was at stake, and Jim Dysart was out to get his man. Frank C. Robertson is still unsurpassed in his vivid pictures of ranch life and all will enjoy this high-speed action story.

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RUSTLERS ON THE LOOSE

FRANK C. ROBERTSON



WILD WEST CLUB

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CHAPTER I

"STOVE-UP COWBOY"

JIM DYSART halted with one foot suspended six inches above the first step of the porch. The sound of muffled voices reached him from inside the darkened room. He withdrew his foot carefully and walked around the end of the porch instead of on to it. The voices came to him clearly now through the open door to the sitting-room.

"Jim wouldn't like it if he knew," came his mother's soft voice. "I've already signed notes for fifteen hundred dollars for you and Ted, and I don't know where we'll get the money to pay for it."

"Aw, hell," came a masculine voice, "Jim's an old woman. He ain't half the sport you are, Mom. I tell you me an' Ted'll pay Bratton back an' Jim'll never need to know about it. And come right down to it he's got no better right to what's here than me and Ted."

"I know, Gooch," Mrs. Dysart replied, "but you can't say Jim has never wasted anything."

"That's because he's never *lived*. Look at him! Never goes off the place except to set an' hold the hand of that crippled——"

"Gooch Dysart! Stop right there," Mrs. Dysart commanded in as firm a tone as her sweet, futile disposition would permit. "I won't have you talking lightly about Jim's love for Polly Bryan. It's noble. What other man would continue to go to see a girl who is a hopeless cripple, year after year, and year after year?"

Jim turned and tramped silently back to the stable, biting on his lip to restrain his angry impulse to go back and throw this younger brother off the place.

So that was what they thought of him—an old woman. Well, perhaps he was a sentimental old fool. Old? He wasn't yet thirty. Yet for ten years he had worked like a slave to keep intact the heritage left him, his mother, and his two wild young brothers by old Bill Dysart.

Did they think he *liked* to be a slave? Did they think he was still so enamoured of poor crippled Polly Bryan that he couldn't see another woman? He loved Polly. Sure he did. But since the fall of that horse which had condemned Polly to lie helpless in a cast for the rest of her natural life that affection was no longer that of a lover. The trouble was he could never let Polly, or anyone else know that.

And this other business. When Bill Dysart had died the

DX had been the best cattle outfit on the Lehi River. But soon after that "Pig" Bratton had landed in the country, and ever since then the DX, along with the rest of the old outfits, had been going downhill, while Pig Bratton's holdings increased by leaps and bounds.

And now these younger brothers of his were surreptitiously persuading his mother to sign notes to pay their gambling debts —to Bratton.

He sat on a manger and smoked a cigarette to cool off. Then, whistling, he again approached the house. His boot-heels rang loudly as he stepped upon the porch.

"That you, Jim?" His mother's gentle voice held a nervous ring.

"Yep. How come you settin' in the dark? We run out of coal oil?"

"Oh, no. Gooch and I were just talking."

"Gooch? What's that worthless whelp doin' here?"

"Hi, old pickle-face," came Gooch's voice. "I'll light a lamp an' turn it up slow so I can get used to you by degrees."

Jim stepped over and kissed his mother while Gooch lighted the lamp. When the youth straightened the brothers were face to face. Gooch was tall and rather slender, his dark face handsome in an irregular sort of way. His eyes were brown like his mother's, rather small, and too widely spaced. He was darker than Jim, whose hair was dark brown and eyes a bluish grey. He was taller, too, although Jim's broad shoulders were already a little stooped from hard work.

"What're you doin' here?" Jim asked bluntly.

A dark flush crossed the younger man's face. "Hell, don't you suppose I ever want to see Mom?"

"Yeah, you usually do when you happen to want something."

"Jim, Jim, don't start a quarrel with Gooch the minute you set foot in the house. I'll go get you some supper."

"Never mind," Jim said. "A bowl of bread and milk'll do me. Where's Ted?"

"Would you believe it? He's got a job."

"No!" Jim cried sardonically.

"Yep. Punchin' cows for Pig Bratton."

"For Bratton? That's damned near the last straw," Jim grated. "Here I am workin' my head off to keep the DX goin', and only able to hire two or three old men to help, and my brother goes to work for the man who's doin' his level best to break me, and the rest of you as well."

"Why don't you git wise to yourself, Jim?" Gooch sneered. "You keep on an' you'll lose everything for all of us. You can't hold out against Pig. Nobody can. He's a comer. A real business man. You're just a stove-up cowpoke, an' when I say stove-up I don't just mean in the body."

Jim fists clinched and unclinched rapidly. This wasn't the

first time he had been called a fool by his younger brothers, but it was getting harder to take.

" I'm still above tendin' bar," he said.

" What's wrong with tendin' bar ? " Gooch shouted. " I make good money, and I have a good time."

" It's your business, of course," Jim said quietly.

" But I do wish you'd quit that job, Gooch," their mother pleaded.

" As a matter of fact, Mom, I have," Gooch told her. " I'm unemployed right now, but I may go to work for Pig Bratton myself soon. Did you know that Pauline was back ? "

" Pauline ? No ! When did she arrive ? I wonder why she doesn't come out to see me ? " Mrs. Dysart exclaimed.

" Well you couldn't hardly expect her to come after the way brother James talked to her dad, could you ? "

" Oh, to hell with you," Jim said shortly. " I'm going to eat."

So Pauline Lant was back home. Jim admitted to himself that he felt hurt because the girl hadn't come out here to the ranch where she had been raised. What had happened between himself and her father should not have made any difference to her. She had been born in the little white foreman's cottage not three hundred yards from this house, and she had been like a sister to the three Dysart boys, and like a daughter to Mrs. Dysart.

Pauline, he thought, should have been big enough to rise above petty prejudice because her father now hated Jim and was doing all he could to ruin the DX. Maybe, however, he thought, these two years she had been away at school had spoiled her. Probably she had developed into a first-class snob and preferred not to associate with old friends.

All right, let her stay away. See if he cared. Still, he hated to see his mother being snubbed.

It was no novelty for Jim to get his own supper. Since the only help his mother had was a slovenly, irresponsible fourteen-year-old girl named Maudie Johnson, who went home nights, he contrived to do considerable around the house himself, despite the pressure of outdoor work.

He ate his bread and milk slowly, and washed the spoon and bowl he had used. He was about to go up to his room when he heard his mother call. " Jim ! "

" Yes, Mom."

He saw that Gooch had gone, and he was glad. There was a light burning now, and his heart softened as he gazed at his mother. She was still a pretty woman with only a few streaks of grey in her soft brown hair. Her hands were soft and fragile, in marked contrast to the rough, red hands of the other ranch-women he knew. As he looked at her he knew that he couldn't rebuke her for secretly signing notes to pay his younger brothers' gambling debts. For ten years now he had shielded this

gentle, sweet-voiced woman just as his father had shielded her for twenty years before him.

"I wish you wouldn't be too hard on Gooch, Jim," she said. "I'm sure he means well."

"Oh, sure. But if he keeps on gamblin' the way he's been doin' you an' me are goin' to have to move off the DX in a wheelbarrow."

Mrs. Dysart flushed guiltily. "Oh, I'm sure it isn't that bad. Jim, why do you suppose Pauline hasn't been out?"

"Maybe Dave has forbid her to come. He's pretty sore at me, you know."

"That's the trouble with you, Jim. You take things too much to heart. If Dave wanted to quit us that was his business."

"Did I ever say it wasn't? But when a man has worked for an outfit over twenty years, and in reality been made a pardner, and then quits right in the middle of a round-up to work for that outfit's worst enemy then I say that man is a snake. That's what Dave Lant done, and——"

"You told him so," she finished for him. "You fought with him. It would have been so much better if we could have stayed friends."

"I want no friendship with Dave Lant," Jim said coldly.

"Well, if Pauline won't come to see me I'm going to see her," Mrs. Dysart declared. "The foolish child probably thinks that because you whipped her father that you might slap her."

"When do you want to go?"

"To-morrow afternoon, if I may."

"All right. I'll have the boys hitch up Split an' Rooster for you."

"I thought I might ride Selim," she said wistfully.

"Nix," Jim vetoed firmly. "I know you're a fine horsewoman, but that heart of yours isn't what it used to be, and the doctor ordered 'no excitement.' That Selim hasn't been ridden for a month and he's rollicky as a yearlin'. You stay off him."

"Brow-beater," she smiled. "Kiss me good-night."

"Brow-beater!" As he lay on his bed Jim wondered if that was what was wrong with him? He had never consciously tried to bully anybody. But he had, since his father died, tried to keep his two irresponsible young brothers somewhere within the limits since it was obvious there was no one else to do it. Certainly their mother couldn't.

He wondered how this gentle-born Virginia girl had ever come to marry that hewed-out piece of granite, Bill Dysart. Yet they had been happy together.

He fell to thinking about Polly Bryan, wondering if he and Polly could have been as happy. They had been no more than kids when they had fallen in love. He had asked Polly many times to marry him since the accident, but she and always smilingly refused. She had urged him to marry someone else.

But there was no one else—not even Polly any more. If Polly became miraculously healed he doubted now that they would ever marry. But Polly would never be healed. She would never leave her bed.

He felt a peculiar sense of guilt, that was followed by a wave of hate. For nearly ten years now he had been paying fifty dollars a month towards the support of Polly and her mother, and only one person in the world knew about it—Mrs. Bryan. Not even Polly herself had ever suspected the truth. But—and here the hate came in—if things kept going the way they had been going it wouldn't be long now until he would be broke. How then was he going to keep on supporting three helpless women?

Only one man was responsible for his financial troubles. Pig Bratton. Jim clenched his fists under the covers. He had a settled premonition that some day he was going to kill Pig Bratton. And then he would probably be hanged.

CHAPTER II

The Helping Hand Gets Stung

Jim Dysart swung down from his horse in front of a long, low building with a board nailed over the door which read:

DYSART POST OFFICE AND GENERAL STORE

It was four miles from the ranch, and had been named in honour of Bill Dysart. It was a cross-roads and the total population was three families.

A smiling, buxom woman of middle age looked up from behind the counter where she was bartering for a dozen pairs of buckskin gloves with a Shoshone squaw.

"Hello, Jim," she greeted. "What can I do for you this morning?"

"Just want my mail, Stell," he said.

"Help yourself," Stella Baxter invited.

Jim walked into the little cage in the corner of the room which served as post office and got his mail from the pigeon-hole labelled D. He fingered the letters casually, but the last one aroused his interest. He wondered what a politician like State Senator Roscoe Cole would be writing to him for. He sat upon Stella's high three-legged stool and tore open the envelope.

"Dear Jim:" the letter began. "As a near and dear friend of your father's, and yourself, I am doing something which, though not illegal, might be construed as slightly unethical if it

became known. That is, passing out information of an official nature slightly in advance of its scheduled time. Jim, come and see me. It will be to your interest. It's something I wouldn't do for anybody else. Take my word for it it is important. Cordially yours, Roscoe Cole."

"H-m," Jim sniffed. He tore the letter into little pieces and dropped them into Stella's wastebasket. "Wonder what that slick politician has got up his sleeve now?" he mused.

He started to open another letter, then paused. He tried to think just what it was the letter had said: "It is important." He was a busy man, and riding the fourteen miles on to Star, the county seat, would kill the best part of the day. Still—

He shuffled through the other letters. None of them could be important. Suddenly he thrust the whole business back into the pigeon-hole and went out.

"Hold my mail, Stell," he called. "I'm goin' to Star. Want anything?"

"No, unless you can convince this squaw that fifteen dollars a dozen is all I can afford to pay for Injun gloves," Stella laughed.

Jim rode into Star a little before noon. It occurred to him that he didn't get to town very often any more. He wasn't even keeping up with the town's progress. He noted several new dwellings and a new store going up. The town had been growing fast. And all this booming, people claimed, was due to the dynamic energy of Pig Bratton.

Jim tied his horse and walked past the saloon where, until recently, his brother Gooch had been tending bar. He didn't pause, but continued on to where a shingle hung above a stair door that opened onto the street.

ROSCOE COLE, ATTORNEY-AT-LAW

He climbed the stairs and knocked on the door. There was no answer. He tried the knob. It was locked.

"H-m," he thought. "Too early for a lawyer to be at work."

He went down to the street and decided to get dinner. He was coming out of the Chinese restaurant when he heard himself hailed.

"Hey, Jim! Jim Dysart, you old mountain mustang. What're you doin' in town?"

Jim turned to greet with a smile a smallish man with an immense sandy moustache, Amos Kittel by name. Kittel had been one of the poorer neighbours of the DX, until five years ago when he had purchased a small ranch a few miles below Star. He had often worked for Jim, and for Bill Dysart before him.

"How are you, Amos?" Jim asked.

"Not so good. My lumbago is killin' me. Say, come on

out to the ranch an' have dinner. The wife'll be tickled pink to see you."

"Yeah?" Jim grinned. "What job have you got out there you want me to do?"

Kittel grinned sheepishly. "I did see yuh come outa the restaurant, but yuh'd been welcome to dinner just the same. Of course if yuh *had* come I've got four bull calves out there that are a leetle too much for me to muckle——"

"Come on," Jim said. "I reckon I got the time."

It was perhaps four miles out to Kittel's little ranch. The only thing unusual about it was that it lay athwart a small cove which was the starting point of a once famous pack trail into an otherwise inaccessible placer diggings called Thunderbolt Gorge. But the gold had long since played out, the little range there might be wasn't worth the tremendous effort to get stock in there, and so the old pack trail winding dizzily up the mountain side was no longer in use.

Forgetting how eager his wife was supposed to be to see Jim, Kittel led the way at once to the corral where he kept the four bull calves. Jim took down his rope.

They had just transformed the last calf into a steer and Jim was washing his hands in the water trough when three men rode up. Any one of them spelled trouble for Jim Dysart. One was Pig Bratton. Another was Dave Lant, for twenty years foreman of the DX, and now acting in the same capacity for Pig Bratton. The third was Jim's youngest brother Ted.

Ted looked uneasy. For all his wildness Jim was fond of this kid brother. He had always liked Ted better than Gooch. It had been a blow to him to learn that Ted was now riding for his enemy, Bratton.

Dave Lant, a typically grizzled cowman who sat his horse like he and the horse had been factory made together, looked straight ahead. He and Jim had not spoken since high words had caused them to fight—a fight in which Lant had taken a licking, which Jim could have made worse.

Pig Bratton waved a careless hand in greeting to Jim, and he and Lant rode up to the fence where Amos Kittel waited, while Ted swerved aside and rode over to the water trough.

"Hell, Jim, I wish you hadn't got into this," Ted said abruptly. "You keep your shirt on and your hands off, an' you won't git into trouble."

"What trouble?" Jim asked gently.

"Listen," Ted said, and waved his hand towards the others. Pig Bratton was speaking.

"What calves are those you've got in there, Kittel?" he demanded.

"They're mine," Kittel replied hotly. "They got my brand on 'em."

"You're a liar," Bratton stated bluntly. "Those are my calves. You stole 'em out of the Norton pasture."

" I did no such thing," Kittel denied. " I raised them calves. You kin ask my wife if I didn't."

" Yeah, fed 'em on a bucket, I suppose," Bratton sneered. " You damned little thief, I'm going to break you from sucking eggs right now." He suddenly raised his bridle reins and brought the ends down across Kittel's head. They would have struck the man's face if he hadn't ducked.

" Jim wait ! " Ted cried urgently as Jim started toward the others. " You don't understand."

Jim paid no heed. " Hold it, Bratton," he called crisply. " You got any bridle-whippin' to do suppose you try it on a man your own size."

Bratton wheeled his horse to face Jim. It was strange how eyes of ice could blaze fire. He was a broad-shouldered man, powerful all the way down, taller than he looked. His straight thin lips were drawn tight against his teeth. In his way he was rather handsome. He was good looking enough that he took no offence at being called " Pig." He was rather proud of it, in fact ; seeing in it a veiled tribute to his ability as a financier.

" If you're asking for it you can have some of the same, Dysart," he grated. " I'm not as old as Dave here, you know."

" The invitation is wide open," Jim challenged. It seemed that the skin over his fists itched for contact with Bratton's face.

Ted suddenly spurred his horse between the two men. " Wait a minute, Pig," he said. " Jim didn't know anything about these calves bein' stole."

" He can be sent to the pen just the same for helping brand 'em," Bratton retorted.

You're a liar, Bratton," Jim said. " These are not stolen calves. You came out here to try to scare Amos into givin' 'em to you. If you want to see how bad scared I am, step down from there."

" Jim, wait," Ted implored. " You don't know what you're talkin' about. They are Pig's calves. I saw 'em myself when they were runnin' in the Norton field. They disappeared three weeks ago."

Jim was taken aback. He hadn't ever suspected Amos Kittel of being a thief, but he had never known Ted, for all his other faults, to lie.

" Are you doubting the word of your own brother ? " Bratton sneered.

" I didn't steal the darn calves, but I'll pay fer 'em to save trouble," Kittel said sourly.

" I'll say you'll pay for 'em," Bratton said. " You'll pay with about three years in the penitentiary."

Jim could see Mrs. Kittel standing in her backyard watching, and wringing her hands in her worn apron. She was the one at whom Bratton's vengeance would strike.

" Wait a minute," Jim said. He turned and strode over to the woman.

" What about this, Jenny ? " he asked kindly.

The woman began to weep. " I told Amos not to do it," she wept. " It wasn't stealin'. We got up one mornin' an' them calves was in the pasture. They wasn't branded. We didn't know who they belonged to. Amos said they was slicks an' we had as good a right to 'em as anybody else. Anybody could see they'd been weaned. We waited a long time, an' when nobody claimed 'em Amos said we'd brand 'em. Hones' to God, Jim, that's the truth."

" I believe you," Jim said.

He walked back to the corral. " I'm not askin' now how these calves got into Kittel's pasture," he said to Bratton, " but I think I know the answer. Anyway, no matter where they come from they were slicks, and Amos had a right to brand 'em. I helped him do it. If you want to try to send us over the road, hop to it. But you be damn' sure you git a conviction, because I'll be after you, Bratton, and I'll be hard to stop."

Dave Lant spoke up for the first time. " I don't think four calves are worth so much trouble," he said. " If Kittel is willin' to pay for 'em I say let it go."

" That's what I say," Ted Dysart chimed in.

" I don't mind the calves, but I don't like the abuse I'm having to take from Jim Dysart," Bratton said. " If Jim will apologize and Kittel will pay me fifty dollars a head for the calves I'll let matters drop."

Jim was caught. If he refused he might kill Pig Bratton, and that would be some satisfaction, but it wouldn't stop the ruination of the Kittels. It was like swallowing a red-hot chain, link by link, but he said, " All right, Bratton, I apologize."

Bratton grunted something unintelligible, and said. "You got the money, Kittel ? "

" I—I—ain't got ten dollars to my name," Kittel said, "but you kin take my horse an' saddle—"

" Never mind," Jim interrupted, " I'll give you a cheque, Bratton."

He wrote out the cheque, wondering if it would ever be used as evidence against him, and handed it to his enemy.

Bratton examined the cheque and pocketed it with his thin lips parted in a smile. Then he and Lant turned and rode away.

Ted Dysart hesitated a moment, then he, too, mounted and followed his new employer and his foreman.

That, for Jim, was the bitterest pill of all. His own brother working for the man who had set out to ruin the entire Dysart family.

CHAPTER III

Brother Against Brother

Jim rode slowly back to town. He had almost forgotten the business that had brought him there in the first place. Now that he was in town he would have to call dutifully upon Polly Bryan and it was not an unpleasant duty. He went into a store to buy her a box of candy.

The clerk wrapped the package, and as he turned he came face to face with Pauline Lant.

Jim almost dropped the candy. This was the first time he had seen the girl in more than two years. She had changed. Unbelievably. The gaunt lines of adolescence had all disappeared. Every contour of her lovely body was sweetly feminine. Her red hair, which the Dysart boys had all joked her about so much was no longer sorrel; it was dark auburn. The freckles that had been so prominent were now subdued until the only ones he could see were a few running across the bridge of her nose, and they added attractiveness.

"Jim Dysart!" she exclaimed. "How are you?" Her hand came out frankly to meet his. She spoke as if genuinely pleased to see him.

"I'm fine," he said with embarrassment. "Don't need to ask how you are, Pauline. You look—great."

"Yes, I always was a healthy little beast," she laughed. "How is Mom—your mother, I mean?" She flushed slightly.

"Mom's fine. Haven't you seen her? She said she was going to drive out to your place to-day and visit you. I reckon she may be there now."

"Oh, my goodness!" the girl exclaimed. "Why didn't I know? I haven't been home since morning. I'll go right out. Is she well?"

"Passably. Didn't Ted tell you she had developed a bad heart?"

"No, he didn't."

Although she professed herself in a great hurry she waited, and embarrassment enveloped them both. Jim wanted to ask her why she hadn't come to visit his mother, but couldn't since it was probably because of him, and his fight with her father.

"How—how is Polly?" she asked after the pause became more than awkward.

"Same as usual," he said. "I was just going to see her."

"So I guessed when I saw you buying that candy. Jim, I think your faithfulness to Polly is one of the sweetest things I've ever known."

He crimsoned; feeling guilty because in his heart he knew that it was no longer love but a sense of duty which chained him to Polly. Affection, yes, but not love.

They walked toward the street. At the door he touched her arm awkwardly. "Pauline, I'm sorry about that fight I had with Dave. I seem to have developed a nasty temper late years."

"I think I understand," she said.

"I just don't want anything between Dave an' me to stop you from comin' to the ranch to see Mom. She couldn't think more of you if you were her own daughter."

The girl's eyes filled with tears. "I can't come, Jim, much as I'd like to. Please tell Mom that, if I don't see her."

"I see. It's Bratton. If you come to see us your father may lose his fat job."

"Good-bye, Jim. I—I—hope we run across each other now and then." She walked one way on the street, and he the other.

A strange transformation had come over Jim Dysart. An impregnable mountain of human ills and misunderstandings ...tween them, but he knew that for the second time in his ... had fallen in love. Not with the wild blindness of a boy, ...with the steady, undying devotion of a man.

...was untying his horse when he remembered that he still ...not seen Senator Cole. He returned to the senator's ...e, still carrying the box of candy. He was moody and ...essed. It was bad enough to have financial trouble weigh... him down without having to undergo a hopeless love attack. The two hundred dollar cheque he had given Bratton would put a serious dent in his bank account. It would be a long time, if ever, before he got it back. And sooner or later the notes which his mother was signing to pay Gooch and Ted's gambling debts would be presented for payment. He had other obligations. And above all, Pig Bratton was putting a range squeeze on him which would shear his power to pay until there was nothing left.

Range which the DX had used as if it was private property had now passed by devious ways under the control of ambitious young Pig Bratton until, with his brand covering less than a fourth as many cattle as in the old days, he was continually hard put to find grass enough to fatten his steers for market.

Well, after all, he thought, perhaps he shouldn't have blamed Dave Lant for deserting a sinking ship and sailing under the banner of one who seemed destined by fate for mastery.

Senator Cole was in. He was a small, suave dark man with an unconvincing smile and an effusive manner.

"Jim, my boy," he greeted. "Come right in. Mighty glad to see you. Have a seat. Have a cigar. You're looking the picture of robust health. It must be the outdoor life." Sigh. "If my business didn't confine me to an office——"

"You wanted to see me, Senator?"

"You got my letter, of course. I hope you destroyed it."

Jim nodded. "Kinda baffled me," he said.

"Jim, I've been hearing things," Cole started. "If reports are true Pig Bratton—and how that name does fit—has just about got you pushed against the wall. Is that correct?"

"There might be a *modicum* of truth in it," Jim admitted dryly.

"You may speak frankly with me. I was your father's friend, and I'm yours. To say nothing of the fact that I'm shrewd enough to know that the Dysart name still carries a powerful lot of weight in the upper end of the county around election day. And I'm in for a hard fight."

"You want my support in your campaign for re-election," Jim said, enlightened.

"I can certainly use it," Cole grinned frankly. "But I'm prepared to do you a favour in return."

"I'm listenin'," Jim said.

"Jim, if you could get hold of the best winter range in this county, by lease, do you think you could hold out?"

"Good Lord, I know blessed well I could," Jim sa- citedly.

"Jim, you can get it. The beauty of it is a great part range Pig Bratton has been using, free gratis for nothing

"You mean Grizzly Meadows?"

"I don't mean anything else." The senator walked ove slipped the lock on the door. "Don't want any interruptic he said. "I happen to have inside information as a mem of the senate committee on public lands that this range going to be transferred to the State within the next sixty days.

"There is already a law on the statute books relative to the leasing of public lands. It can only be leased for ten cents an acre to the first applicant. Jim, if you'll make application to lease that land and pay a thousand dollars down you can get a ten-year lease before Pig Bratton even suspects there's any thing in the wind."

Jim was ashamed of the trembling of his limbs. If that was true it meant economic salvation more complete than he had ever dreamed. It would build the DX back to what it had been and effectually frustrate Pig Bratton's ambition to control the county.

Grizzly Meadows was the finest winter range in the country. The DX and various small outfits had used it in common. Bratton now owned most of those small outfits, and he would attempt to crowd the DX out. Furthermore, Jim knew he was in a position to do it. But with a lease to the land the DX could hold its own indefinitely.

"In return for that, Senator?" he asked.

"I told you," Cole said softly, "that I figure your support would mean at least two hundred votes to me. And, of course,

if you should want to hand me say a thousand dollars for acting as your attorney that would be, er, acceptable."

Jim said nothing. He was a little nauseated by the character of the man to whom he would owe this favour. He needed that range badly, and yet the price Cole was asking was in reality a bribe. He was silent for a long time.

"Well ?" the senator asked. Icicles seemed to be growing around his voice.

"Frankly, Senator, I haven't got two thousand dollars I can lay my hands on right now."

Cole heaved a relieved sigh. "Never mind the second thousand now. I know you can raise a second thousand for the deposit. Plenty of men will lend you that."

"I'll have to have a little time," Jim said.

"Surely. Only don't take too long. Once this thing becomes public knowledge Pig Bratton would be on it like a dog on a bone."

Jim rose. "I'll see what I can do," he said. "I'll let you know in three days."

"Good ! Oh, yes. There is one other thing. You'll appreciate my position, I'm sure. I never like to have money paid to me by cheque. Ten one hundred dollar bills would be very convenient."

Even as he thought how dreadfully he needed Grizzly Meadows Jim was thinking how pleasant it would be to kick the honourable senator in the pants. But if he didn't avail himself of this opportunity he knew that he was going to be forced into bankruptcy. He wouldn't mind for himself, but he had his mother and Polly Bryan and her mother to think of.

Thinking of Polly caused him to get his horse and ride out to the little white cottage on the edge of Star where she and her mother lived.

As always, a lump rose in his throat when he looked at the small, white face of the girl on the bed. She had been so active, Polly had ; she had so dearly loved to dance and ride, and sing, and now here she lay scarcely able to lift a hand.

"Hello, Jim," she said in her quiet voice. "I had a feeling you were going to come to-day."

He took her hand, and stooping over the bed he kissed her forehead.

"I brought you a box of your favourite candy," he said.

"Jim, you shouldn't waste money buying candy for me," Polly said. "In fact you shouldn't waste even your time on me. Why don't you find some good girl and get married ?"

"Why, you're my girl, an' always will be," he said gallantly. "And who do you think would have an old has-been like me ?"

"I could think of a good many who would have you, but not so many I'd like you to have," Polly said. "Still, I could name some."

"Who, for instance ?" he demanded.

“ Well, Pauline Lant for one.”

“ Don't be silly, Polly,” he said shortly.

The girl said nothing, but watched him closely. He hastened to talk about something else. As soon as he could do so with courtesy he left her. It had been an eventful day. First the Kittel affair, then the meeting with Pauline, and finally Senator Cole's proposition that would save him from bankruptcy. Strangely, the trivial thing, the meeting with Pauline, was the one he kept thinking about.

He wished he had someone to talk over his troubles with. He couldn't disturb his mother or Polly, and they wouldn't understand. He was too bitter toward his wasteful young brothers to take them into his confidence. He remembered how when she was only a kid he had always been able to talk to Pauline, and if she couldn't give him help she could give him encouragement. Now, thanks to her father's treachery in going over to Bratton, he couldn't talk to Pauline.

He usually made decisions carefully, but this Grizzly Meadows business couldn't wait. He could see no wrong in taking advantage of information which had come into his possession. He was not responsible because an elected officer had divulged certain facts that were not yet public knowledge. It certainly would be worth a thousand dollars to have Cole act for him in the matter. The alternative was ruin for the people he loved.

Raising two thousand dollars wasn't going to be easy. Pig Bratton now controlled the only bank in Star. His pride wouldn't allow him to apply for a loan there, even if there had been a chance for him to get it.

He could think of but one person from whom he might get the money, an old retired cattleman named Gene Partee, who had been a friend to his father and himself. Partee, now partially crippled, spent most of his time in Star playing “ sluff ” in the Amboy Saloon. For all that Partee had sold the Big Hat outfit to Bratton, where the latter now made his headquarters, and lived with the Lants, no blame for anything that had happened belonged to Partee.

The first thing Jim saw was a twenty-one game going on and the shirt-sleeved dealer was Gooch Dysart. One of the three players was Pig Bratton. Bratton was an inveterate card player, although he never seemed to neglect his business to gamble.

Just beyond the twenty-one players the man Jim was looking for was, as usual, engaged at his sluff game.

Gooch looked up with a grin. “ Hello, Jamesy, what brings you to town ? ”

Jim ignored the remark and started to pass on, but Gooch wouldn't have it so. Gooch felt himself insulted. “ Hey, are you too damned good to speak to me an' my friends ? ” he demanded, rising directly in front of Jim.

“ Get out of my road, Gooch,” Jim said in a low voice. “ Your friends ain't my friends.”

"All right. Then if my friends ain't good enough for you to speak to neither am I," Gooch cried furiously.

"Just as you say," Jim said. He waited for Gooch to step aside, but instead Gooch swung.

Jim saw the blow coming and parried it enough to catch only a glancing blow on the jaw. Then his own fist shot out in a straight, short punch that popped like a cracked board when it landed in his brother's face. Gooch went down, and instantly his face became a bloody smear. His nose was bloodied, his lips cut, and his teeth loosened by that one devastating punch. There was no more fight in him.

Jim was horrified by what he had done. He hadn't realized that he could hit so hard. Gooch was a man grown, twenty-six years old, and he was taller than Jim, although not quite so heavy. Yet to Jim he was still more or less an irresponsible boy. He stooped quickly.

"I'm sorry, Gooch," he said, but his brother rolled away, then got to his feet and rushed toward the wash room.

Jim turned and with a sudden, swift, impetuous kick overturned the twenty-one table, spilling cards and chips all over the floor. His eyes bored into those of Pig Bratton.

Pig sat unmoved. "That's twice to-day you've tried to pick a row with me, Dysart," he said. "I'm a patient man, but don't let it happen again."

Jim felt old Gene Partee's hand upon his shoulder. "Come on with me, Jim," the old man said. "You need to cool off."

They walked over to the bar and had a beer. A moment later Pig Bratton got up and walked out, not deigning to help right the overturned table.

"If yuh ask me, Jim, Gooch has had that comin' to him for a long time," Partee said. "Don't feel bad about it. It may do him good."

"Thanks, Gene. I was comin' in to see you."

"That so? What do you want?"

"Two thousand dollars."

Partee toyed silently with his beer glass. "So it's that bad," he said at last. "I was afraid of it."

"I can still offer security," Jim assured him.

"Tell me one thing: When your mother dies will Gooch and Ted still come in for their third each of what's left of the estate?"

Jim looked the old-timer straight in the eye. "They don't think they will because both of 'em have assigned all their rights to me, but if there's anything left they'll get as much as I do. But the debts will have to be paid first."

"You're a fool, Jim. I happen to know that it cost you around forty thousand dollars to pay off their gamblin' debts. That money went to Pig Bratton an' gave him his big start, while it busted the DX. It was that money Pig paid me when he bought the Big Hat. Does your mother know anything about that?"

" No, and I'll wring your neck like a partridge's if you ever tell her."

" How do you want the two thousand : certified cheque or the cash ? "

" If it's all the same with you, Gene, I'll take the cash."

" Okay, but you'll have to go over to the bank with me. I hate to do business with that slimy Latham Hicks who runs the bank for Pig, but I've got one ace in the hole anyway. Pig Bratton still owes me a lot of money."

Jim had no liking for Latham Hicks either, but he accompanied his friend to the bank, and after considerable irritating delay they got the money in hundred dollar bills.

Neither of them guessed that the delay was due to Hicks taking time out to secretly mark the bills.

CHAPTER IV

Beauty on Parade

Pauline lost no time in getting out to the old Partee ranch where she and her father lived, after hearing from Jim Dysart that his mother was coming to visit her. The ranch buildings lay well back in the deep canyon some ten miles from Star. It was now the property of Pig Bratton, and headquarters for that enterprising gentleman's rapidly increasing holdings. Bratton had an office in town, but since the girl's return from the East he spent most of his time at the ranch.

Although her pony was winded when she reached the ranch Pauline was too late. She saw by the tracks where a buggy had turned around in the yard and driven away. Nevertheless, she hurried into the kitchen to ask the almost totally deaf, two hundred pound housekeeper how long Libby Dysart had been gone. She had to scream her question twice before she got an answer out of the woman.

" Over an hour," finally answered the huge woman, whose only name, so far as Pauline could find out, was Allie.

For a moment Pauline was tempted to ride after Mrs. Dysart, but abandoned the idea. Mrs. Dysart would be home long before she could catch her, and she had reluctantly given her word to her father not to visit the DX.

For the thousandth time she wondered why Dave Lant had been so insistent. She knew that he had quarrelled with Jim, and that Jim had given her father a whipping, although she understood it was not a severe one. She didn't believe that that was enough to cause her father to forbid her to see her old friends. She had even asked him if he had anything against Mrs. Dysart.

" Nobody has anything against Libby Dysart," he had said with a weak smile.

She had been happy to get home. Despite her father's talks about the advantages of education she was far happier here. Or she had been. She had missed the old free life on the DX, and as the days passed she found herself growing more and more restive. The feeling had become more pronounced lately because of the attentions of Pig Bratton. She was almost certain that the man meant to ask her to marry him, and being the kind of man who always took what he wanted as soon as he could get it the proposal would not be long delayed.

She knew nothing against the man, but she didn't care for him. Her father, however, was patently anxious to have her be nice to Pig. She knew enough about Bratton to know that if she refused him he would promptly discharge her father. Did his job as foreman mean so much to Dave Lant that he would have his daughter marry a man she didn't like ? He was drawing good pay, she knew ; twice what he had ever got from the DX. It was what enabled him to send her away to an expensive school, something that had been the dream of his life, but did he really believe that it was worth the price ?

She had at first been pleased when Ted Dysart had started to work for Bratton little more than a week ago, but that had caused her worry because she knew it represented a split in the Dysart family. Ted was twenty-three—only a couple of years older than she, and in some ways he had been closer to her than Jim or Gooch. She still loved him as a sister might, but since she had seen Jim again her emotions were strangely disturbed. Meeting Jim had thrilled her as nothing else had done since her return, yet Jim was the one who had petted or paddled her as the occasion had seemed to require.

She cared less for Gooch than either of the others. He had always been selfish, and a little on the cruel side. Meeting him again had given her no particular thrill. She soon heard rumours about his intemperate gambling and drinking.

She had just unsaddled her pony when her father and Ted rode into the yard. She saw by their faces that something had happened. " You two been to a funeral ? " she asked.

" No, what makes you think we have ? " Lant asked shortly.

" Well, a band of crepe on your arm would match your faces."

" Quit imaginin' things," her father grunted, and headed for the house.

" Ted, what happened ? " she demanded.

" Oh, Dave is a little upset because we caught Amos Kittel brandin' some Hat calves."

" I don't believe it ! I know Amos isn't a rustler."

Prodded by her inquiries he told her what had happened.

" But that isn't stealing," she asserted. " I'll bet that Pig Bratton would brand Kittel's calves if they came to his place unmarked."

" And how," Ted grinned.

" If he had been a sport he would have said for Kittel to keep them," she declared hotly. " It was a dirty deal for Jim to have to pay for them."

" I reckon it was," Ted admitted. " I sure hated to find Jim there, but I kinda think Pig knew he would be there. Still, I don't hardly see why Dave is so glum about it, but he is."

" Your mother was here to-day, Ted."

" She was ? How does she feel ? "

" I didn't see her."

" Look, Paul : why don't you ride up an' see Mom ? "

" I can't. Dad has asked me not to. Ted, will you be honest with me ? "

" Ain't I always been ? " He tried to speak lightly and failed.

" I don't know. What's the matter up there ? Why are you working here instead of at home ? Why is Jim so troubled ? "

" Oh, I don't know. Jim bought out me an' Gooch, an' we have more fun here."

" If Jim bought you out you shouldn't have to be working for fifty dollars a month. Come clean, will you ? What fool thing caused all this trouble ? "

" You always were a persistent little devil," he laughed. ' All right. It won't sound very good, but you asked for it. Two of the Dysarts are in plain an' simple language no damn good. You can guess which ones."

" I don't believe it. Gooch, maybe, but not you."

What one of us has done the other has always done," he declared. " You know that. After Dad died I guess we thought we were millionaires. We wasn't worth our salt on the ranch. Spent most of our time in Star. First our gamblin' was penny ante stuff, then we went after the big dough. Next time we had to go to Jim an' offer to assign him our share of the estate to clear our debts, and that's about all."

" No, it isn't, Ted Dysart. Jim had to ruin the DX to get that money. Now the outfit is so small that Pig Bratton will drive him out. You are not only ruined yourselves but you ruined Jim and your mother," she said hotly.

" So that's what you think of me," he said stiffly. " All right, if the sight of me is so hard on your eyes I'll draw my time."

" Oh, Ted, you fool. Don't you know that I only want to help. No matter what my father has done the Dysarts are my people and always will be. I just don't like to see you giving both Jim and yourself a raw deal."

"Well, it's too late now," he said. "Anyway, I'm gettin' by on my fifty a month."

Pig Bratton arrived at the ranch later, just as they were about to sit down to supper. He complimented Pauline on her appearance, then turned to Ted.

"If I'd known what was going to happen I'd have kept you in town," he said. "That big brother of yours is still fixing himself up for a darn good licking."

"What's he done now?" Ted asked sulkily.

"He just about knocked all of Gooch's teeth out. Then he kicked over a card table where I sat, and acted like he wanted to lick me. I kept my temper, but I warned him not to cross my trail again."

"Jim," Ted said steadily, "could whip you at any mark in the road."

"Hunh?" Pig stared unbelievingly at the young puncher, then he laughed. "Still a lot of family devotion here, I see. Admirable sentiment, but poor judgment. I can't think of anything that would be easier to do than knock the ears of Jim Dysart."

Ted kicked back his chair and talked out of the room.

"Come on back, Ted," Pig called. "There's no need for you and me to row." But Ted didn't come back.

Just before bedtime Pauline cornered her father. "What's this all about, Dad?" she demanded. "I know you admire Jim Dysart even if you did fight. I can't think that you really want to help Pig Bratton break Jim."

"Who said I did? Anyway, I've got my own interests, and yours, to consider."

"Libby Dysart was here to-day, but I didn't see her. I did see Jim, though."

"You can't see him again," he ordered. "I won't have it."

"For the same reason that I mustn't visit Libby? That reason is because if I do Pig Bratton will fire you. That's so, isn't it?"

He didn't deny it. "I like it here, and the least you can do after what I've done for you is not to make trouble."

The girl resolved to adjust herself to her father's wishes as much as possible. After all she was all that Dave Lant had or cared for. At times it was difficult; particularly accepting the attentions of Pig Bratton. If she remained at the ranch Pig seemed to have business there. If she went for a ride she soon found him by her side.

Twice she avoided going to dances with him, but it only increased his persistence. Then one day he said casually, "There's a travelling troupe giving a show at the Opera House to-night. I'd like to take you, Pauline."

"I really don't think I care to go," she said.

Pig turned to Dave Lant. "Maybe you'd better see what you can do to persuade her," he said meaningly. "Seems I

don't have much influence, and she needs to get out."

A peculiar look crossed Lant's face, but he said dutifully, "I think you'd better go, Pauline."

It was a command, and she bowed her head. That evening Pig presented himself in the best carriage he could hire in Star, and with an expensive bouquet which she knew instantly he must have sent out for, proving that he had calculated on the event at least several days in advance. He was dressed in a cutaway coat with striped grey trousers and a derby hat.

Pauline was wearing a simple little dress which didn't satisfy Pig at all.

"You've got something better than that," he declared. "This is an occasion."

"I'm afraid I haven't," she denied.

"Listen," he said. "You sent your father a picture taken in your graduation dress. Say, you were a beauty in that. The minute I saw that picture was when I fell in love with you. Haven't you still got that dress?"

Pauline knew that her face was red. She glanced toward her father, and saw an unhappy look on his face. In another moment, if she refused, Pig Bratton would apply that old pressure upon him to get her to wear the dress, and she couldn't bear to see him humiliated.

"All right," she said, "I'll wear it. It needs pressing, but if you don't mind——"

"Take all the time you want," Pig gloated.

She went into the hallway and started upstairs. Half-way up she stopped, then moved by a sudden impulse she swiftly removed her shoes and descended the stairs. The two men were alone in the sitting-room. She could just barely hear their voices.

"If Pauline wants to marry you, Pig, it's all right by me, but damned if I ain't gettin' tired of orderin' her to go around with you," she heard her father say.

"I can do my own courting if I get a chance," Pig answered, "but I can't do it if she keeps avoiding me. You'll see that she goes with me when I ask her."

Somehow, Pauline expected to hear her father flatly refuse such an outrageous order, but he didn't.

"Don't crowd me too far, Bratton," Lant said with a weakness Pauline had never before heard in his voice. "Remember I know a few things myself."

Pig Bratton laughed evilly. "You mean the Kittel business, I suppose. Don't kid yourself. I can put that whole thing on to young Dysart, and I won't hate to do it. I can put the screws on you any time I want to, Lant. I want to marry Pauline, and I'm going to do it. And when I need a little help from you I'll get it."

Shoes in hand Pauline fled wildly upstairs and closed her door. Her heart was beating as if it would fly out of her chest.

Never once had she thought that her father might be a crook, but the thing she had heard could mean nothing else. He was at Pig Bratton's mercy—and so was she.

After a time she got out the flimsly lavender *crepe de chine* evening gown of which she had once been so proud and put it on. She had to wear her gold slippers with it, and do her hair all over again. At last, after more than an hour, she went downstairs.

Dave Lant had disappeared and Pig was waiting alone. His colourless eyes almost popped from his head at her loveliness.

"My dear, you are beautiful," he said. "And you are going to be mine. All mine." He tipped her head back and kissed her unresponsive lips. Then he pinned his bouquet at her waist.

They were late to the show, but Pig didn't mind. Every head was turned around, and the play had to stop while they were coming down to the seats he had reserved in the front row. With a ghastly feeling of weakness Pauline knew that in the eyes of the audience she belong to Pig Bratton as much as if she had been branded and earmarked.

CHAPTER V

"I Won't Let You Down"

Jim hadn't intended to attend the show at the Star Opera House, but he was there. He saw Pauline sweep down the aisle on the arm of Pig Bratton in a dress which might have been all right in the East, but was certainly out of place here where evening gowns were as unheard of as knee-length skirts. He felt vacarious shame and humiliation at the half suppressed titter of the women around him.

At the next intermission, just before the last act, he went out to smoke, and he didn't come back.

It was the first time he had been in Star since he had knocked Gooch down in the Amboy saloon. That was the day he had seen and talked with Pauline for the first and only time since her return from the East. He would not have been in town this day had it not been absolutely necessary.

That morning his mother had come to him in tears, holding out a notice from the State Bank of Star—Pig Bratton's bank.

"Dear Madam:" the notice read. "We must again call to your attention the three promissory notes, totalling twenty-two hundred dollars, on which you are co-signer with your son Gooch. These notes are payable on demand, and the bank finds it necessary to request immediate payment. Inasmuch as we are unable to locate Gooch Dysart at this time we must insist that you make arrangements to take up these notes at

once. Yours truly, Latham Hicks, Cashier, State Bank of Star."

Jim read the note and stared at his mother in silence.

"Gooch promised me he would have the money, and you would never need to know anything about it," Mrs. Dysart said through her tears. "Now I don't even know where he is."

Jim hadn't known that Gooch had disappeared. He had not mentioned Gooch at home because he didn't want her to find out that he had hit his brother.

"Yes," he said, "I knew you were signing those notes. You should let Gooch take care of his own gambling debts."

"It might have been for something else," she said hopefully. "Anyway, they'll have to be paid. I do hate to worry you, Jim, but you must do this much for your brother."

"I'll do more than that for him if I ever catch him," he said grimly.

"I suppose I'm weak, but Gooch could always twist me around his little finger," she said apologetically. "You will pay this, won't you, Jim?"

"Of course. I'll go down there to-day."

"Thank you, dear," she smiled through her tears, and he knew that within the hour she would forget all about it.

There was no use to ask her not to sign any more notes. Just so surely as Gooch asked her to sign another note she would sign it. She had no sense of money—Bill Dysart was partly responsible for that. She had never been denied anything, so she had no reason to think that the resources of the DX might be exhaustible.

It would be another two months before he could sell any cattle, and he would again have to apply to Gene Partee for a loan. He would probably have to be evasive, for the old cattle-man would never loan the money if he could see that bank notice.

He wanted to go to town anyway, to ask Senator Cole how the Grizzly Meadow lease was progressing. Also, Polly would be wondering why he hadn't come to see her.

"Jim," his mother said as he was leaving the house, "if you should happen to see Pauline please give her my love. And do try to find out what has become of Gooch."

"All right, Mom," he promised. "I'll do my best."

He found Gene Partee engaged at his endless game of sluff with three of his cronies. "Hi, Jim," Partee greeted. "This time I see you got clear to the back end of the saloon without knockin' anybody down. What's on your mind?"

"Can I have a little talk with you, Gene—in private?"

"Reckon so. But I sure feel a heart solo comin' up that'll break the pair of unfortunates that happen to be playin' against me."

"Heart solo, my eye," one of the others jeered. "You ain't made even a frog all day."

Partee pushed back his chair. " Where to, Jim ? "

" Let's eat. We can talk in the restaurant."

They found a quiet booth, and Jim came directly to the point.

" Gene, I want to borrow another two thousand."

" Look," Partee said slowly, " you ain't follerin' in Gooch an' Ted's footsteps, be ye ? "

" I give you my word, Gene, I don't gamble."

" I loaned you two thousand without askin' what it was for because I saw you didn't want to tell, but I ain't made o' money, Jim. Most I got is tied up in farm mortgages—the biggest bein' on my own old ranch."

" You mean Pig Bratton still owes you money ? " Jim queried.

" Twenty-five thousand dollars. Of course I could dig up another couple of thousand if I knowed—"

" I'm sorry I took you away from your game, Gene."

" Hold yore horses, yuh young squirt. I didn't say I wouldn't lend yuh the money. I just wanted to be sure it wasn't goin' to cover gamblin' debts of them no-'count brothers o' yores."

" But that's what it's for," Jim said, and handed the old man the notice from the bank.

" You're a bigger fool than your dad was," Partee commented. " Only thing kept him from bein' a sentimental half-wit was that he was the best cowman ever lived. Now that he's dead you're the next best. By the way, where is Gooch ? I ain't seen him since you landed on him."

" I don't know."

Gene Partee took considerable time rolling and lighting a cigarette as though purposely to make a hiatus in the conversation. Then he remarked, casually, " I hear there's been quite a lot o' horse rustlin' goin' on up at the head o' the Lehi lately. Sounds to me like the work o' the Denton gang. You missed anything recent ? "

" Not a thing," Jim said. He had a feeling that the old man opposite him could see his flesh crawl. Partee was insinuating that Gooch might have joined the Denton gang of outlaws. The very hell of it was that Jim knew the old man might be right.

" Tell you what we'll do," Partee said. " If I understand matters right the DX belongs to you three boys, but your mother has a life lease on it, so a mortgage wouldn't be much good. Same holds good with the livestock. Of course you could give me a chattel mortgage an' sign as your mother's agent, but I wouldn't want to be put in the position of ever havin' to sue a woman. We'll go over to the bank an' you sign a new note for ninety days, and I'll sign as surety. That'll give you time to sell some cattle an' take it up."

" We'd better forget the whole thing," Jim said.

"Never figgered you to be a coward, Jim. I know you don't like the idee o' borrowin' money from your wust enemy, but you won't be turned down. My name on a note means something."

"All right, Gene," Jim said bleakly. "Let's get goin'."

The alternative was to have Pig Bratton bring suit against his mother. That couldn't be permitted to happen.

Latham Hicks, the unctuous cashier of the Star Bank, rubbed his hands together as they entered. He was a little torn between his desire to be obsequious to Gene Partee and insulting to Jim.

"Anything I can do for your gentlemen ?" he queried.

"Yesh, you kin fix up a new note to cover them notes signed by Gooch Dysart an' his mother, an' Jim an' me'll sign 'em," Partee said.

"Well, gentlemen, I'd be glad to oblige, but an irregular matter like that I shall have to take up with my board of directors," Hicks said.

"You mean with Pig Bratton," Partee stated calmly. "We got no time to be foolin' around. Pig may be a big shot around here, but I'm still able to buy him twice over. You fix up them notes, pronto."

"Well, if you insist," the cashier said doubtfully.

"I do insist, an' ten minutes is all I wanta wait," Partee said.

They were out of the bank in eight minutes. The matter was taken care of, but it didn't make Jim feel good to know that he was now under obligation to his worst enemy. Whatever happened he couldn't ever allow his friend to have to pay that bill.

"I suppose that other two thousand went for the same purpose," Partee commented when they were outside.

"That's where you're wrong," Jim was happy to say. "I give you my word that was a business investment pure and simple."

"That makes me feel better," Partee said.

Jim had other business to attend to in town, and when that was finished he went to call on Polly. As usual he kissed her upon the brow. "You don't need to do that, Jim," she said.

"Do what ? Kiss you ?" he blurted.

"There. I still like to return your kisses even though I know they don't mean what they used to."

He kissed her upon the mouth, and felt her lips pressed hard against his."

"Oh, Polly," he cried, and was suddenly overcome by an uncontrollable storm of emotion. He lay half across her, his face buried in the unused pillow on the other side of the bed. For a minute his body was racked by silent, agonized man's sobs.

Somehow she contrived to get her frail arms around him. She kissed him again and again, just in front of the ear.

"You're in trouble, Jim," she said when the storm began to subside. "Why can't you tell me, dearest?"

He stood upon his feet. "Hell of a comforter I am," he said. "I come in here to cheer you up, and blubber like a baby."

"I like it, Jim. It shows you are still human. And I know you wouldn't betray your weakness to any other person on earth. It makes me feel very proud."

"You're a wonderful woman, Polly. I wish I was worthy of you."

"It's funny how one changes, isn't it?" she asked. "The last time I was out of this room I was a foolish, carefree girl, about to be married without the slightest idea of the responsibilities of matrimony. Now I'm a pretty wise woman, don't you think?"

"You're wonderful, Polly."

"Jim, I wonder if you've ever remembered that I am the way I am because I disobeyed your orders? You've never once reproached me for it. You gave me that Lad colt that I wanted so badly, but you forbid me to ride him for a month until you got him better trained. But I took him out of the barn anyway. He handled nicely at first. Then up on top of that rocky ridge he got frightened and started to run down over those rocks, and—"

"Polly, please. Please don't work yourself up remembering that," he begged.

"Funny, that's the last thing I remember from the time Lad started to stampede until I came to here in this room. The first thing I said was, 'Tell Jim it wasn't Lad's fault.' I was so afraid you would shoot him."

"I wanted to."

"Lad turned out to be one of the best horses you ever had. The moral is never put the blame in the wrong place. Pauline has been here to see me several times lately."

"Hunh? What are you driving at, minx?"

"I don't want you to put the blame on Pauline for other things that have happened. She's in love with you, Jim."

"What? Why, you're crazy. I've only seen her once since she came back."

"I know. She's never told me how she felt, but there's a light in her eyes when she mentions your name."

"You're imaginin' things you little idiot."

Polly paid no attention. "I suppose you think I should be jealous, but I'm not. I want you to be happy. I could still have you, Jim, in my own foolish way, and neither Pauline nor I would be jealous of the other."

"You're a romantic little tramp. Pauline wouldn't touch me with a ten foot pole."

He stayed to have supper with her, and would have remained longer only that she insisted that he must see the play being given at the Opera House. When he kissed her good-night he

did so more tenderly than he had kissed her for many months.

She was wrong about Pauline, of course, he tried to convince himself, and he was glad that his sophistries failed. He couldn't see how anything could come of it, but it was nice to think that in spite of everything Pauline might care for him.

He was walking along toward the Opera House when he heard his name called. Glancing around he saw Dr. Wilkerson, also alone.

" Going to take in the show, eh ? " the doctor said. " That's good. I hear it's pretty good, and we don't get to see many good shows even if we do have a highfalutin' Opera House."

" Yes, Polly insisted that I see it," Jim answered. " By the way, doctor : just how is Polly getting along anyway ? Any sign of improvement ? "

" I'm glad you asked me that, Jim. I don't want to spoil your evening for you, but there's something I think you should know. I don't want to sound poetic but the finest flower if cut off at the stem has to wither."

" You mean that Polly——"

" A year at the longest, Jim."

" Do you think she knows ? "

" No, but she wouldn't be surprised. She reconciled herself to it a long ago. There's no need for her to know, or for anything around her to change."

" Thanks, doctor. Now if you'll excuse me I'll go back and spend the evening——"

" Nonsense. She sent you to the show, didn't she ? It would only worry her if you went back. The thing is to let things run along as they have been doing. That way she'll be happy. And, Jim, I want to congratulate you on the way you have stood by. Quite accidentally I discovered who pays the bills. But don't worry, your confidence will never be abused. Well here we are, and it looks a nice crowd."

When Jim failed to return for the last act Dr. Wilkerson was sure that he understood. Jim had been upset by the bad news about Polly.

Pauline walking down the aisle in that outrageous, although becoming dress, on the arm of Pig Bratton ! Jim knew that he would never forget it. The Lad horse falling with Polly had ended one stretch of his life, and this ended another that had scarcely begun.

Pauline wasn't marrying Pig Bratton for love. He would have bet his life on that. So, she must be marrying him for his money. She was as greedy and avaricious as her father. To hell with both of them, he thought bitterly.

He wanted to get back to the ranch, but he hadn't yet been able to see Senator Cole. The way things were shaping up everything depended on his getting that lease to Grizzly Meadows. With that the DX could not only hold on, but enlarge. Without it bankruptcy was certain. The chances

were he wouldn't even be able to pay Gene Partee the money he had borrowed. He had to know if there was any possible chance of a slip-up.

It was ten o'clock before he got to see the lawyer.

"Why, hello, Jim," Cole greeted effusively. "Come right in. How are you?"

"I'm okay," Jim said. "How is that lease business coming along?"

"Fine, my boy, fine. You ought to know that I wouldn't let you down. Your application has been filed ahead of anybody else's. Ahead of anybody."

Something in the lawyer's manner made Jim look at him narrowly. He didn't like that remark about letting him down. If the senator hadn't considered letting him down there would have been no need to mention the matter. He felt uneasy. It occurred to him to wonder if Cole was fishing for more money.

"How soon will I know?" he asked.

"It shouldn't be long now. I'm expecting the announcement to be made any day. You know, Jim, my boy, I could have sold this advance information to others for a lot more than a thousand dollars."

"I didn't know I was giving you a bribe, senator."

Cole flushed. "It's not a question of bribery," he said shortly. "I'm an honourable servant of the people. I resent the slightest implication that I would accept a bribe. But I still say there are people, Pig Bratton, for instance, who would have paid me a far higher fee for my services."

"Are you crawfishin'?" Jim queried, his whole body beginning to grow numb.

"Young man, I'm not one to go back on my word," said the senator offended. "If you didn't pay me a dollar your application will still stand ahead of anyone else's. You have my word of honour on that."

"Well, that makes me feel better, senator," Jim said, relieved. "And if the deal goes through I'll up the ante another thousand."

"As attorney's fees. Strictly as a fee, understand," Cole said. "I appreciate that. Now, I would enjoy having you stay for a chat, but I am very busy this morning. Leaving for the captial to-morrow. Public business, you know."

Jim found himself out on the sidewalk. He was a badly worried man. "After all, he can't double-cross me without going flat back on his word," he thought. "But just how good is his word?"

CHAPTER VI

SIGNS OF TROUBLE

JIM evaded his mother's inquiry, " Did you see Gooch ?" with comparative ease. He merely told her he supposed Gooch had got a job somewhere. It wasn't so easy to dismiss the matter when she asked about Pauline.

" Yes, I saw her—briefly," he said. " Didn't get to speak to her though."

" You didn't ? Why, I'd have gone up and spoke to her no matter who she was with."

" In the middle of a show ? No, Mom, I don't think you would. That's where I saw her. She was with Pig Bratton."

" Well, afterwards," she persisted.

" I didn't stay till it was out," he said, and his tone let her know he wanted the subject dropped.

" Did you have any trouble fixing up those notes ? " she queried shamefacedly.

" Oh, no, I just went to Pig Bratton's bank, and they said they'd be glad to extend the time till after round-up."

" There ! I knew it would be all right," she smiled.

Jim drew a long breath.

" You know what," Mrs. Dysart said presently, " I believe I'll make another effort to see Pauline to-day. Don't you think I might ride Selim, Jim ? "

" No," he said firmly. Fear that his mother might come to disaster had grown upon him ever since Polly's accident. Keeping her off a horse had become almost a phobia. " Selim ain't safe, Mom, and if your heart started to act up with you——Promise me, Mom, you won't ride any more horses ? "

She made a wry face. " One would think I was eighty years old to hear my sons talk," she said. " I've always ridden. Your father liked to have me ride."

" I'll tell Harvey to hitch up the buggy team any time you want it," he said, and got up from the table.

With Bratton's bank holding his note it was more urgent than ever now that the DX have a good beef and calf crop. His only help was three old men—good men at that—but he had to do the work of three men. There was Harvey Coltrin, who had been an irrigator on the DX before Jim was born ; Jeff Teeters who had worked for the outfit nearly as long, and Pee-wee Rust, a little, dried-up old puncher who had come into the country with Bill Dysart so long ago that he maintained that Thunderbolt Mountain had grown to its present size from a little bit of a hill during his period of residence. Pee-wee was the regular range rider, Harvey was the main-stay

on the ranch, while Jim and Jeff Teeters divided their time between ranch and range as needed.

Jim rode over to Pee-wee's camp and found the old man's saddle on the ground, but his bridle gone. Half an hour later Jim came upon the old puncher toiling futilely and angrily after two gentle horses which he had managed to separate from the cavvy, but couldn't quite catch.

As though enjoying the joke the animals would mosey along until Pee-wee got almost close enough to fire his rope, then they would lope out of danger.

Jim took down his rope and after a short gallop hung a loop on to the neck of one of the old bays. Once caught the old animal trotted sedately behind Jim's horse as he rode over to where Pee-wee had dropped down upon a flat rock.

"I thought you'd punched cows long enough to know you ought to keep up a night horse," Jim jibed.

"Don't speak to me," Pee-wee said without looking up. "I'm in the mood to do murder."

"What happened ?"

"When I went out this mornin' all I found was three feet o'rope".

"Broke loose ?"

"Slashed."

"You sure.?"

"Think I can't tell a cut rope ? Some blankety-blank so-and-such cut my rope to leave me afoot. If I ever line him over the sights——"

"Anything like that happened before ?" Jim demanded.

"Not that, but three, four days ago I found a butchered calf. Hind quarters missin'. I been watchin' around there to see if the thief come back. I betcha five dollars we find another dead calf this mornin'."

"Why didn't you tell me ?" Jim asked.

"Meant to if I didn't ketch the cuss purty soon myself."

This might mean a lot and it might mean little. A range butchered calf was no great novelty. The big cow outfits always expected to lose a few that way. But it might mean more.

Pee-wee mounted the bay bareback and they rode back to camp. Then they visited what remained of the carcass of the calf some miles from camp.

"I bet we kin find another, fresher one within a mile o' here," Pee-wee declared. "I know the methods o' these damn veal thieves."

"You ain't rode the other side of Trail Crick Pass then for three days ?" Jim queried.

"No, but I had everything pushed well back from there. They don't bother much there now because the feed is better on this side."

"We're goin' to ride it now," Jim said.

Riding the Trail Creek line had been Pee-wee's chief duty, this to keep DX stuff from getting too near range now controlled by Pig Bratton with his Big Hat brand.

Jim's experienced eyes discovered where a bunch of cattle, thirty or thirty-five in number, had crossed the trail on the wrong side of the pass. He looked for horse tracks but couldn't find any with the cow tracks. However, half a mile further down he saw where two shod horses had crossed the dim trail which followed the creek. The main cattle trail was some distance to the right. A couple of miles further on they came upon the cattle. Jim counted them. There were thirty-two.

There were many dim trails here, and many places where cattle could be driven without striking a trail at all.

"Well, I guess this must be all of 'em," Pee-wee said with satisfaction.

Jim's eyes were bleak. "You take care of them," he said. "I'm goin' on."

His suspicions might be unfounded—he sincerely hoped they were—but this didn't look good. In three days a lot of tracks would have disappeared. The picture as he saw it was this: A calf had been butchered to attract Pee-wee's attention. To further detract the old man's attention his night horse had been cut loose, leaving him on foot. A large bunch of stock could have then been driven over the pass by night, after which the same rustlers, or more probably accomplices, had driven the thirty-two head up to the top of the pass, given them a start so that they would wipe out the tracks left by the men driving the first bunch. The two men who had driven these had then taken the little used trail along the creek and got ahead of the cattle. Even if trailed their tracks would probably lead to nothing in particular.

It was all a hypothesis, of course. It had been several years since rustlers had been active on more than a picayune scale. But if this was rustling at all it was big.

There was a bunch of outlaws, known as the Denton gang, which was sporadically active. This might be one of their forays. On the other hand it might be someone else.

If any cattle had been stolen the rustlers would have had to drive them across the upper neck of Pig Bratton's range. During his short, greedy career in the country Bratton had never been suspected of outright theft. Dave Lant was his foreman, and no matter what his private feelings toward Lant were Jim would have banked on his honesty. Then, too, there was Ted.

The farther he rode the more convinced he became that he was mistaken. But if he had lost say a hundred head of cattle it would be a hard blow. And if rustlers got away with one bunch they would come back for another.

By noon he was well into Bratton's range—range which, by the way—had once been used by DX cows. He saw more and more cows with the Hat brand, and with one small bunch he

discovered a couple of two-year-old steers wearing his own brand. There was nothing strange about that. Cattle were bound to drift, and they would be collected and taken home at the regular round-ups.

There was no longer any chance of striking the trail of a bunch that might have been driven. He felt a little sick to see how much better grass was here than on his own range.

There was no use to go further, but no profit in going back to Pee-wee's camp the way he had come. He could take a shorter route home, and by detouring from that a few miles he could pass along the edge of Grizzly Meadows—the range which alone could save his bacon.

This was winter range, covered with thick, dry grass, really wild hay cured on the root. Insects were so bad in the summer time that no animals could graze there, but as winter pasture it was unsurpassed. The very sight of it gave Jim more optimism than he had felt for a long time.

He was caught completely off guard when riding from an aspen thicket on to a small clearing he met Pauline emerging on to the other side of the same clearing. There was no chance for either of them to avert a meeting.

The girl was the first to speak. " Hello, Jim ! I didn't know you rode this part of the range any more."

" Well, I can still feast my eyes on past glories, you know," he replied. They met and stopped, their horses muzzling noses.

" I'm sorry to see the DX going to pieces, Jim ; honestly I am. I know it isn't your fault."

" Well, it looks like you might be going to profit by it anyway," he said, and was conscious that it was a mean remark.

" Just how do you mean ? " Frost was getting into her voice.

" No offence," he said. " Of course what the DX loses the Big Hat gains, and seeing you at the Opera House last night made me think——"

" You had no right to think anything of the kind," she blazed. " Can't a girl go to a show with a man without of necessity having to marry him ? "

" I guess so," he grinned. " You were sure dressed to kill. I'll swear I wouldn't have known you if somebody hadn't told me who you was."

She looked at him suspiciously. " I suppose that is your crude way of picking fun. Nice to have seen you again. Good-bye."

" Wait ! " he called, but she had wheeled her horse and given it the spurs. She galloped back the way she had come. He soon saw where she turned off toward the old Partee ranch. Not until then did he realize that she must have seen him loping along the edge of the meadow and had come on purposely to meet him, even though she had tried to make it look accidental.

Now he had made her mad, and he couldn't see why. Of course there had been an undertone of bitterness, and possibly contempt in his tone, but he hadn't meant for it to be there, and he wondered how she had caught it.

Anyway, it was the finish of his relations with Pauline Lant.

CHAPTER VII

Bad News and a Bullet

" I guess," Mrs. Dysart said sadly, " that I'll have to give up trying to see Pauline. She was out somewhere on the range and again I didn't see her. Mr. Bratton said he didn't know where she was."

Jim looked up quickly. " You saw Bratton ? " he asked.

" Yes, and he seems to be a very nice man. Seemed right sorry that Pauline wasn't there, and he told me that he thought Ted was one of the best men he had."

" Well, I'm glad Ted is doing somebody some good," Jim said irritably. " I could sure use him here."

" I just can't understand why the boys don't want to work at home. And I'm getting downright worried about Gooch."

" He'll take care of himself," Jim said grimly.

The only way now to find out whether rustlers were operating on a big scale was to get out and ride from dawn till dark. To facilitate matters Jim camped with Pee-wee, and leaving that little man to handle the routine riding, he covered every section of the range during the next four days.

It was impossible to get an accurate count, but the sickening certainty settled over Jim Dysart that he was out cattle. There was too large a percentage of cows and calves compared to dry stuff. It meant that the animals which were disappearing was his best beef steers and dry heifers !

At a wild guess he would say the DX was out between a hundred-fifty and two hundred head, at an estimated value of from eight to ten thousand dollars. Something had to be done.

First, he would have to have more help. He rode back to camp and helped Pee-wee move up to near the top of the pass.

" Let the rest of the riding go," he ordered, " and watch this pass at all times."

" Yuh really think they're goin' out this way ? " Pee-wee asked.

" They can't go across Iron Mountain, and if they could they wouldn't be anywhere. On the other side are too many ranches, and if they went toward Star they'd have to go right past the ranch."

" The fust damn rustler I see I'll shoot tuh kill," Pee-wee promised.

"Don't. You watch which way they start, then high-tail to the ranch," Jim instructed.

Unshaven and dirty Jim rode into the ranch in mid-afternoon. There was a saddled horse in front of the house. With a start he recognized Pauline's familiar saddle. It was one that he had given her for Christmas more than five years ago.

Only something unusual could have brought her there, he knew. He had said that he was through with her, but he was suddenly conscious of his dirty clothes, and his short, bristly beard. He wouldn't make the concession, however, of sneaking in the back way and cleaning up before he presented himself.

He heard his mother's soft laughter as he stepped on to the porch. Their voices ceased as he bulked in the doorway.

"Jim!" Mrs. Dysart cried. "How nice you came just now. Look who we have for a visitor—Pauline!"

"Hello, Jim," Pauline said quietly.

"Hello, Pauline. You've finally got around to visiting Mom, I see."

"Yes, and isn't it a pity I've got to run along the moment you get here?"

"Oh, you mustn't go," Mrs. Dysart cried. "You must stay for supper. Jim, you go and get cleaned up. I'm ashamed Pauline should see you so unkempt."

"Oh, I couldn't really," the girl said. "I just stole the time away as it was." She looked at Jim, but he didn't second his mother's effusive invitation. She retreated as far as the yard gate while Mrs. Dysart pelted her with hospitality. Jim came as far as the porch and stood there.

"Jim," the girl said with what sounded almost like desperation, "will you ride a little way with me?"

"Why, sure," he said, and joined her at the gate.

"I have to say more than 'hello' to him," Pauline said apologetically to Mrs. Dysart.

"Try and get back in time for supper, Jim," Mrs. Dysart said dryly.

"You didn't ride over here after all this time to see Mom," Jim said presently.

"Right. But don't flatter yourself it wasn't because I couldn't stay away from you."

"You've managed pretty well so far."

"Let's not quarrel, Jim. I'm worried."

"You? Why, I didn't think you would have a care in the world."

"Don't be nasty. It doesn't become you. Leave me some illusions. I've always thought of you as the kindest man I ever knew. I'd like to keep on thinking of you that way."

"I'm sorry, Paul," he said contritely. "What is your trouble?"

"I'm afraid it's more your's than mine. It's about Ted—and Gooch."

" What about them ? "

" I happened to overhear a remark a couple of days ago. Latham Hicks was out from town, and I heard him ask Pig, ' Aren't you afraid to keep that youngest Dysart boy working here ? ' Pig laughed, and said, ' I've got him right where I want him. He's working with the Denton gang, and watching him is the easiest way to catch them.' "

" I don't believe it ! " Jim fairly howled. " Ted may be reckless but he's not a thief. I'll stake my life on it."

" I haven't finished," the girl said. " Next day I followed Ted. Believe me it was more to try to keep him out of trouble than because I wanted to spy. I love Ted as if he was my own brother."

" Go on."

" Away down in a remote little canyon I saw Ted meet two other men. One of them was a stranger. The other was Gooch."

" So both my brothers are thieves, I suppose."

" Are you blaming me ? I'm only telling you what I heard and saw."

" No, I'm not blaming you," he said in a half-strangled voice. " I—I appreciate you telling me. It—it's just hard to take. You see I've never been as sure of Gooch as I have Ted."

" Nor I. Oh, Jim, we've got to do something. Even if they are innocent Pig Bratton will get them into trouble, if for no other reason than that he hates you. And he does hate you, Jim. Bitterly."

" The feeling is mutual, and the fact that he's going to make you Mrs. Pig Bratton doesn't make me love him any better."

They were out of sight of the house now and they stopped.

" I'm glad you care that much, Jim," she said frankly. " I know you never could love anyone but Polly, but it's nice to know you care a little bit about who I marry."

" You are going to marry him, aren't you ? "

" I don't know. He seems to think I am, and I believe Dad wants me to marry him. Why not ? "

" Shall I tell you ? "

" Yes."

Jim felt the hot blood racing through his veins. Brain and body were on fire. A tingling began at the roots of his hair and reached to his toes. He reached her arm around her back and drew her half out of the saddle. His lips touched hers lightly, then with crushing, bruising force. And she responded. He felt her arm go about his neck, and she held him fiercely while she returned his kiss.

She was suddenly pushing him away. Her face was red, then white.

" This—this is terrible," she panted. " I—I'm so ashamed. I mustn't see you any more." She whirled her horse about

and cut it around the flank with her bridle reins. Fifty yards beyond she vanished around the brow of a small ridge.

He made no effort to follow. He was still thinking crazy thoughts. Crazy, delightful thoughts. She had challenged him to kiss her. He knew that. And for one mad, delirious moment she had returned his kiss. Whatever else Pauline might be she was no hypocrite. She loved him! That one thing nothing could take away from him.

His thoughts swung slowly back to what she had told him. The implications were vast and far reaching. If Gooch had gone utterly to the bad it would be like him to try to drag Ted down with him, and his influence over the younger boy had always been damnably complete.

Could it possibly tie up with the theft of his own cattle? Had Gooch become so bitter that he would steal from his own mother? It was hard to think so. It was more reasonable to suppose that Pig Bratton had got both boys tied up in the same spider web which he had spun to get their share of the DX away from them in an unbelievably short time.

From high elation his spirits sank to the depths of despondency. That conviction which never left him, although it was buried far, far back in his consciousness, began to grow. It was the conviction that some day he was going to have to kill Pig Bratton—or be killed.

His own fight for financial survival now hinged almost entirely upon getting control of Grizzly Meadows. Even with that he might go under unless this rustling epidemic was stopped.

He tried to tell himself that Ted's meeting with Gooch might have been entirely innocent. The man Gooch was with might not have been a member of the Denton gang. He just couldn't make his thoughts stick to it.

One consideration now outweighed all else. He had to get Ted away from Bratton's employ before the boy landed in the penitentiary or worse.

It would hardly do to follow Pauline to the ranch. He couldn't talk to Ted there anyway. He wished he had told Pauline to have Ted meet him some place. He would contrive to do it some way. He knew that Ted frequently dropped in at the store in Dysart. He would, as a first step, ride around that way and have Stella Baxter tell Ted to come home.

He spurred lightly, and as his horse stepped forward something tugged at him where his shirt flared away from his ribs. The horse jumped, and at the same instant he heard the wicked br-a-ang! of a rifle.

Jim reacted instantly. He drove his horse straight for the aspens covering the little ridge. His carbine was in the scabbard, and he carried no belt gun. He couldn't doubt that he had just escaped a cold-blooded attempt at murder.

The dry-gulcher must have been watching him for some time.

Doubtless whoever it was had been following Pauline; had seen her enter the Dysart ranch alone and come out with Jim. It raised grisly forebodings. Pauline had been doing a little amateur spying upon Ted. Was it not possible that Pig Bratton had had someone trailing her?

The fear that Pauline might be in danger outweighed his other fears. For all he knew the would-be assassin might have been Pig Bratton himself. Anyway, he realized that it opened a new era on the Star range; or perhaps reopened an old era might have been more nearly correct, for when Bill Dysart had been a young man the range had had its share of blood and tears.

It was curious that up to now he hadn't seriously considered the possibility of a bloody range war as the result of his private feud with Pig Bratton, but that single shot definitely promised it. All he had considered before was that some day he and Pig might meet and shoot the thing out. But now, with spies and bushwhackers on the prowl, and his own brothers suspected of being rustlers, anything could happen.

CHAPTER VIII

Rustlers on the Loose

Pauline had had no thought of being kissed by Jim Dysart, let alone returning his kiss with all the fervour of her body until it had actually happened. She had not known until that moment that she loved Jim with all her heart and soul, and she had not suspected that he loved her until he had answered that sudden, inexplicable challenge of hers in a kiss that laid bare the hearts of both of them.

"Why, why did I have to do it?" she moaned as the wind split around her face as she let her horse gallop without restraint. She had no blame for Jim, only for herself.

She could never marry Jim, she knew; even if by so doing it would not bring ruin upon her father. Jim belonged to Polly Bryan, and Pauline would have cut off her right arm rather than hurt Polly. It was true that Polly had hinted vaguely that Jim might be in love with her, but believing that Polly was only entertaining a little very natural jealousy Pauline had got her off the subject as quickly as possible.

It was not at all strange that Jim's love for Polly should have changed. A man couldn't be expected to go on being rabidly crazy about a hopeless cripple, no matter how loyal he might be. But Pauline felt that she had treacherously stabbed Polly in the back.

There seemed but one thing to do. That was to marry Pig Bratton as quickly as possible. It would help her to forget Jim

and it would take the burden of fear off her father's shoulders.

Pig had not in so many words asked her to marry him, but she knew that she could lure him into a proposal with a word or a glance, and she was primed to do just that as soon as she reached the ranch. But Pig was not there.

The first person she met was Ted Dysart. He had just come in from the range and she quickly noticed the haunted look on his boyish face. He managed to smile.

"Hello," he said, "if you're goin' to ride the range all the time why don't you ride with me once in a while?"

"I came very near it yesterday," she said quickly. "In fact I was right behind you when you met Gooch. I almost joined you, but I thought I'd better not."

The blood drained from his face. He licked nervously at his lips with a suddenly dry tongue. "You—you saw me meet Gooch?" he queried lamely.

"I did. Who was with him—Cy Denton?" She spoke lightly, but she was voicing her suspicion, and her fear.

"How—how did you know?" he whispered.

"Then it was Denton! Oh, Ted, why don't you quit being a fool? Don't you know that you're being watched, and that Pig Bratton would like nothing better than to send you to the penitentiary?"

He stepped back and his young face went bleak and cold. "So you think I'm a rustler do you?" he said bitterly. "Well, if I get the name I'd as well have the game."

She caught his sleeve as he swung about. "Ted, for two cents I'd slap some sense into you," she cried angrily. "I didn't say I thought you were a rustler, but you're going to be branded as one if you don't change your ways. Why don't you quit here and go home? Jim needs your help badly."

"Yesh? How do you know what Jim needs. You never go there."

"I just came from there," she said. "I don't want anyone to know it, but——"

He seized her shoulder roughly. "You went there to tell Jim about me meetin' Gooch," he accused.

"Yes."

"Well, you've fixed things up nice for me," he said bitterly. "Now I can never go home."

"Wait," she ordered tensely. "What wrong did Jim ever do you or Gooch?"

"None. It's all the other way. Sure we been fools, but we've got too much pride to go back an' ask him to kill the spotted calf."

"Fatted calf, fool," she said, and suddenly the tension was broken.

"I wish you hadn't told Jim anything, Paul," he said. "Gooch an' me'll just have to work out our own problems."

"Ted, can't you understand that if you had a sister she

couldn't think any more of you than I do ? I don't want to see you get into trouble. I could help if you'd let me."

"Goin' to marry Pig Bratton, ain't you ?"

"Yes, I suppose I am."

"Well, if you think I'll take charity from him you're mistaken. Don't you think I savvy that he wants to ruin all the Dysarts ?"

"Then why are you working for him ?"

"Go ahead an' think it because I want to git back at him. Between us Gooch an' me lost over fifty thousand dollars to a couple of card sharks we know now Pig steered us up against. We could have refused to pay the sharks, but our friend Pig was 'backin'' us. He kept takin' up our I O U's. But then I mustn't say anything about the man you're goin' to marry."

"Ted, you don't think I'm going to marry Pig because I want to, do you ?"

He looked at her with amazement. "Good Lord, has he got something on you, too ?" he blurted. "Why, damn his soul, I'll——"

"You'll do nothing of the kind. Pig hasn't got anything on me. I simply have my reasons, and they don't concern you. Now won't you please go home and see your mother anyway. She's worried about Gooch."

"Of course I'll do that," he promised. "As soon as I can get around to it." He stood for a moment, considering. "Look, Paul : you never broke your word to me in your life. If I tell you something, and ask you to do something will you promise never to give any of it away ?"

"Yes, Ted, I promise."

"Gooch ain't no rustler—yet. It took him a long time to see that Pig had been systematically robbin' us, an' then he kept on tryin' to get even, and only gittin' in worse. He met Cy Denton, an' they talked about stealin' Hat cattle. Denton made Gooch believe he would only be gittin' back what belonged to him. That's what they talked to me about. Wanted me to help 'em at this end."

"Ted, you are being watched every minute. Pig thinks that is exactly what you will do. You'll be caught."

"I know that. I want you to try to make Gooch believe it. If you'd talk to him——"

"Of course. Where is he ?"

"I'm to meet him in about a week at the head of Nigger Creek. Will you come with me ?"

"Of course, Ted. To make sure we're not followed we won't leave together. I'll cut behind your trail, and then you cut behind mine, and we'll meet up in the hills."

"Good."

"There comes Pig," Pauline said. "Let's not let him see us talking together too much."

She went into the house, and a few minutes later she heard

Pig come in. She had hoped he would go back to Star, but apparently he meant to spend the night at the ranch. She heard him ask the housekeeper to bring him a can of gun oil. Apparently he was cleaning his rifle. He looked up when she entered the dining room where he was at work.

" Going hunting ? " she asked.

" Well, you never know when you might get a shot at something," he said. " I shot at a coyote to-day and missed. Gun barrel was dirty."

Pauline sat down opposite him. She meant to say the thing that would lead him to a proposal, but it wasn't easy. He appeared sulky.

" I was thinking," she said finally " that it would be nice to make a music-room out of this, and build an addition on at the north so that the men could reach the dining-room without having to come through the rest of the house, and the family could eat by itself if it wanted to."

Pig looked up quickly. " Say," he said, " that's an idea. I never did like the idea of eating with the hired help. You just think of that ? "

" Oh, no, I've been thinking about it for quite some time."

" You'd like it better that way ? "

" Well, perhaps, if I was going to live here very long."

" Well, why not ? Or would you rather live in town ? "

" I hate towns."

He put the rifle down, wiped the gun oil from his hands on a clean rag and came over in front of her.

" You know you can live here just as long as you want to," he said eagerly.

She became cold-bloodedly coy. " Oh, but you might want to fire us, Mr. Bratton. The foreman of a cow outfit can never be sure of his job."

" Fire, hell ! " His voice had suddenly become hoarse. " I sure will fire the pair of you if you won't marry me. I'm crazy about you, Paul. You've got to marry me."

She eluded his clumsy grab for her, and beat a retreat. He followed. She was nauseated by the game she had to play, yet there was no escape. She meant to postpone marriage as long as possible, but as his *fiancée* she might be able to halt somewhat his persecution of the Dysarts, and it would remove the mountain of fear on her father's shoulders. She put the long table between them, and he stopped. " Don't you like me ? " he demanded.

" I didn't say I didn't," she temporized. " You are not very romantic. A girl wants to be asked, not told."

" I get it," he laughed. " Sweet stuff. Somehow I hadn't figured you that way. All right, darling, will you marry me ? "

" I'll think it over," she said brightly, and scurried from the room before he could come closer.

She shuddered when she reached her room. That was over

—or was it ? He would assume that she would marry him, but she had let herself in for a lot of oily attentions. Some how, she must contrive to conquer her aversion for him, and try to become a model wife.

The next day her father said. "I'd like to have a talk with you, Pauline."

" All right, Dad. What have I done now ? "

" Pig tells me he has asked you to marry him."

" That's right."

" He says you led him to believe you would accept him."

" That's what you want, isn't it ? "

" I don't know. I thought it was. Now I'm not so sure. I want you to be happy. I don't want you to marry Pig Bratton on my account."

" Let's not talk about it, Father. Perhaps I don't love Pig now, but I may come to it after I forget——" She hadn't meant to say that.

" After you forget what ? Pauline, is there another man ? "

' No. Just forget I said it. But I don't want to be rushed. Dad, I was over to the DX to-day."

" I warned you not to go over there," he said. " How is Libby ? "

" Same as always ; serenely unconscious that anything might ever threaten her, but worried a bit over Gooch and Ted."

" So am I. I can't fire Ted, but I wish he would quit."

The conversation was getting nowhere. She understood his feelings. He loved her well enough that rather than have her to be miserable he was prepared to sacrifice his good name, and probably his life. He was moody and despondent by nature, and rather than face the disgrace that hung over him, whatever that might be, he would probably destroy himself. She couldn't let that happen.

" Don't you worry about a thing, Dad," she said with forced cheerfulness. " I'll marry Pig and everything will be all right."

At eleven o'clock Pauline and Ted met at their prearranged rendezvous. Both were palpably nervous.

" I cut your trail an' followed you for three miles, till you turned off to follow me, an' I didn't see anybody," Ted reported.

" And I didn't see anyone following you," Pauline said. " I don't think either of us were followed."

" I hate to drag you into this, Paul."

" I want to be in it. Where do we meet Gooch ? "

" About a mile from here, in an hour."

Their efforts at trivial conversation while they waited were pretty futile. Pauline was glad when he said it was time to start. It was high, upland country, largely covered by scrub pine and aspens, with trickling springs or creeks in almost every draw.

It was at one of these brushy springs they were to meet Gooch. For the most part they were able to keep out of sight, and the last part of the journey they had continually to dodge limb and branches and once the girl missed and got a scratch across her cheek that brought the blood.

"It's nothing," she said. "Go on."

"Wait here till I break the news to Gooch if he's here," Ted said.

He didn't return for a quarter of an hour. His face was grave. "Gooch is purty mad," he confessed. "He thinks I double-crossed him, but he said he'd have to see you."

She tried to smile as she greeted Gooch, but his surly response wiped the smile from her face. Gooch was the handsomest of the Dysarts. In a masculine way his face had the fine lines of Libby Dysart. His brows were drawn down now in a sulky scowl. "Hello, Gooch," she said. "Long time no seeum."

"Don't be funny," he returned. "Git your preachin' over with an' git to hell out of here."

"I didn't come to preach, my fellow sinner," she said. "If you've got a good thing in this rustling business I want to be in on it."

"I never thought my own brother would give me away," he said bitterly. "Now you're here I'll tell you both to go to hell. You go your way an' I'll go mine."

"I saw your mother yesterday, Gooch. And Jim. Jim's sorry he hit you that time. Your mother doesn't know anything about it. She's terribly worried because you don't come home."

"Why can't you mind your own business? You always were a busybody."

"Uh-huh, you used to call me Pauline Pry, didn't you? I'm still at it, and I'm going to stay at it until I know you can't get Ted into trouble. If you want to go to the devil that's your business. But I came to tell you that Ted is being watched because Pig Bratton knows you so well he figures you'll do just what you're trying to do, and he'll get to send you both to the penitentiary."

"I don't believe it. Pig thinks I'm his friend, damn him."

"I'm going to marry him. I ought to know what he's doing, hadn't I?" she asked quietly.

Gooch nervously rolled and lighted a cigarette, then immediately threw it away. "I suppose what we planned to do is out," he said angrily. "Too many spies."

"Gooch, that's not fair to Paul," Ted said. "If she hadn't found out that I was bein' watched we'd have both been caught in a jam. As for me I'm goin' home an' ask Jim for a job. I think we'd both be better—Hey! What was that?"

"It's cattle," Gooch replied. "Somebody's drivin' cows down the draw. We'd better git out of this."

Before anyone could move they heard shots, and a volley of bullets whined high over their heads !

They suddenly saw a bunch of cattle with lolling tongues run out on the sidehill, but immediately afterward half a dozen horsemen crashed through the brush and sped past them. They were all strangers to Pauline, but she knew that one of them was the man she had seen with Ted and Gooch. Cy Denton !

Denton turned in the saddle and yelled, " Come on, come on. It's a posse——" He saw Pauline then, and his eyes popped out of his head, but he didn't draw rein. The bullets of the posse still sang overhead.

" Git goin', Gooch," Ted said tersely. " I'll look after Paul."

Gooch gave some ghastly, unintelligible sound, and raked his horse with the spurs. He was only a little behind Denton and the other outlaws.

Pauline's horse leaped wildly as Ted's reins came down across its rump. They were racing along the side of the draw, opposite the still running cattle. The brush sheltered them, although it whipped cruelly at their faces. There was a short open space across the top of a ridge. If they could cross that without being seen they would be safe in the next draw. They raced across it, but they were seen. Pauline heard bullets screech much closer than at the spring. Then they were over the ridge, and rising pell-mell down the other side. Presently they were in such a jungle that they had to slow down to a walk and the brush became so thick that they would have to dismount before they could go further. They stopped and listened. If anyone had followed them over the ridge they could have heard them coming. There was no sound save the breathing of their horses.

" The best thing for us to do," Pauline whispered, " is to get off and wait right here till we know it is safe to move."

" Yeah," Ted agreed in a strange voice.

She was on the ground first. She saw Ted's toe catch in the stirrup. He got it loose, but he stumbled backward and sat down heavily.

" Ted ! Ted ! " she cried distractedly, " you've been shot ! " There was a rapidly widening patch of blood on his shirt.

" Tell Mom——" he said, and then his head fell over sideways.

Whether he was dead or unconscious she didn't know.

CHAPTER IX

"TED—IS DEAD"

JIM had tried every way short of going directly to his enemy's ranch to get in touch with his brother Ted. He had left word in Star with people who were sure to see Ted if the boy came to town, and he had asked Stella Baxter to send a note to Ted if anyone who could be trusted happened to be going to what was still called the Partree ranch. But Ted hadn't appeared.

Jim's head was still more or less in a whirl because of Pauline's unexpected revelation of her true feelings toward him, but his response was tempered by a realization of futility, and particularly by that rifle bullet which had almost cut him down.

The exigencies of range work gave him no time to rest. He needed at least two men badly, but he knew of no one he could hire, and he entertained a hope that Ted might come home to help out. He no longer expected anything from Gooch, except trouble.

Mrs. Dysart had developed an unexpected case of jitters. Most of it was attributable to worry over Gooch.

"With both the other boys gone I just can't stand it, Jim, if you don't come home of nights," she declared.

"All right, Mom, I'll get home or break a leg," he promised.

"I just can't understand why everything has gone so topsy-turvey," she said. "You so worried, the boys staying away so long, Dave Lant quitting us, and Pauline waiting so long before she came to see me."

"I wouldn't bank too hard on her coming again, Mom," Jim said. "She might get into trouble if she does."

"But why? Even if you did lose your temper with Dave he shouldn't hold such a grudge that he won't let Pauline come back to what was practically her home all her life."

"I just couldn't say, Mom."

"Jim, I wonder if that note I signed a long time ago had anything to do with the way Dave is acting."

"I don't suppose so—What note? Have you been signing more notes that I don't know about?" he gasped excitedly.

"Only one," she said. "That was a long while ago. The reason I didn't tell you was because Dave asked me not to. But now maybe I ought to tell you."

"Oh, Mom, why don't you let me handle the business and keep your signature off promissory notes?" he said wearily. "What was this one?"

"Well," she said defensively, "you'd have signed a note

with Dave while he was working here if he had asked you to. He said I wasn't to worry, that he would have it paid off in two or three months, and that's been nearly three years ago."

"How much was it?"

"I can't remember. I'm not sure I asked him how much, but I think it was about five thousand dollars."

"Five thousand! And who was the note made out to?"

"I know I never noticed that."

He groaned helplessly. He couldn't feel angry. He knew that she was as irresponsible as a child about money matters. The one to blame was his father. Bill Dysart, seeking to be fair, had made his will so that Jim was only manager of the estate for her until she died, but until that time she was the nominal owner. It angered him to think that men he had trusted, like Dave Lant, and his own brother, would take advantage of her innocent credulity.

If the note was three years old, he thought, the chances were Lant had long since paid it off. But he could think of no five thousand dollar business deal in which Lant could have been involved.

He let the matter slip from his mind, but in deference to his mother's wishes he spent as much time near the ranch as he could. There was plenty of work to do there, and besides, he wanted to be close around if Ted showed up.

He was helping Harvey operate a ditcher when he saw a horseman entering the ranch gate. The man proved to be old Gene Partee. It had been a long time since the old cowman had visited the DX, and Jim knew that it would take something unusual to get him away from his everlasting sluff game, even for a day. He hurried to meet him.

"So I found you home," Partee said after they had exchanged greetings. "'Fraid I'd have to ride the range after you, and I been out o' the saddle so long I gall easy." He eased himself gingerly from the saddle.

"Anything wrong?" Jim asked, his mind filled with thoughts of the money he owed Partee.

"Nope. I just had a hunch you don't git to town often enough to know what goes on. Thought I might bring yuh some news."

"That so? What gives?"

Partee settled himself on a sawhorse and gnawed off a quid of tobacco. "You could just raise hell if you owned them Grizzly Meadows, couldn't yuh?" he asked.

"I could certainly stay in the cattle business, if that's what you mean."

"That's what I mean. Well, sir, they's rumours afloat down in Star that the State is takin' over that ground, an' that it'll soon be subject to lease. I thought I'd better ride out an' tell you. You need it worse than anybody, an' there'll be plenty a-grabbin' for it."

Jim fondled his chin a moment before he answered. "Would it surprise you to know that I've had my application in for the last month ?"

Partee gave a start. "It shore as hell would," he averred. "How come you to know about it ?"

"I'm not at liberty to tell that, but it's why I borrowed that first two thousand dollars from you."

"In cash. O-o-oh. Well, I'm bloody well glad, and I shore hope nothin' goes wrong."

"I don't see how it can."

"Well, it looks like I've had my ride for nothin'. I was goin' to say that if you needed money to lay on the line I'd lend it to you."

'Thanks, Gene. I appreciate it more than I can say. Your help and the prospect of getting the lease on Grizzly Meadows is the only hole card I've got. Otherwise, things ain't goin' so good."

"What's up ?"

"Rustlers. I'm losin' cattle and I'm shorthanded."

"That's bad. Denton gang, prob'ly. Say, while I think of it, I saw Amos Kittle yesterday. He's sold his place an' what cattle he had an' he said to tell you he'd like to come work out what he owed you."

"You tell him to come right along."

They sat and talked about the rustling for well over an hour. Partee declared at last that he would have to be getting back.

"Got to stop an' see Stell Baxter while I'm up this way. She'd pull my hair out if she heard I'd been up here an' hadn't stopped."

Jim smiled.

"You watch that lease, Jim," Partee advised. "Pig Bratton knows about it now, an' his name ain't 'pig' for nothin'. Hey, I wonder who that is stirrin' up so much dust.

A horseman was turning into the ranch at a hard run. Jim's eyes were better than the old man's. Despite the dust he recognized Pauline Lant. His heart missed a couple of beats. Only something of drastic importance could have brought the girl there at such a speed. He completely forgot his guest as he stood awaiting the girl's arrival.

Her horse showed that it had been run for many miles. The girl's face was streaked with dirt and perspiration, and there was a long, red scratch across her cheek.

"Pauline, what's wrong ?" he cried as she stopped.

"It's Ted," she answered. "He's been hurt." She permitted Jim to half lift her out of the saddle.

"What happened ? Where is he ?" she asked.

"He's at the ranch. I brought him out. I don't know how, but I did. He was still alive, I think when I left. I—I—had to tell you. Oh, Jim !"

It was the first time in his life he had seen Pauline anywhere

near hysterics. She was in his arms, sobbing wildly against his breast. He picked her up and carried her to the house. He was glad his mother was having her long afternoon nap. Partee followed them.

The girl had hold of herself before Jim carried her through the door. She squirmed to her feet. " Don't let Mom know," she whispered.

It was too late. They heard Mrs. Dysart coming down the stairs.

" Go somewhere," Partee ordered. " I'll talk to her."

They ducked into the dining-room an instant before Mrs. Dysart entered the sitting-room. " I thought I heard——" she began.

" Howdy, Libby," Partee said. " Did I skeer yuh? Reckon I make as much noise as a herd o' stampedin' cattle."

" Oh! Mr. Partee. I wasn't expecting company." She was all flustered, making rapid little dabs at her hair. " I just woke up."

" You look all right to me, Libby," he said. " Set down. Long time since you an' me had a visit."

" I thought I heard voices," she said vaguely, as she took a rocking chair.

" Oh, Jim's about the place somewhere," he said easily. " I was just talkin' to him."

Jim and Pauline went on through the house and into the back yard. They hurried over to a granary and he made her sit upon an upended sack of bran.

" Now what happened, Paul?" he asked gently.

" Ted was shot. He had a meeting arranged with Gooch, and I went with him. It was near the head of Nigger Creek. We had scarcely started to talk when Cy Denton and his outlaws came along with some stolen cattle. There was a posse after them. Ted and I tried to get away, but Ted was shot in the back."

" You said you got him out," he prompted calmly as he saw her breast beginning to heave again.

" He was conscious. I bandaged the wound as tightly as I could and somehow, I don't know exactly how, I got him across his horse and tied him on. Then I brought him out to the ranch. He was breathing so faintly I couldn't really be sure he was breathing at all. I sent a man to Star for a doctor and I came on here to tell you what had happened."

" What about Gooch?" he asked.

" He went with the bandits. I don't believe they caught him."

" So he's finally turned badman," Jim said bitterly.

" Not yet. He only wanted Ted to help him get even with Pig. I'm sure of that. Ted wasn't going in with him. He went there to talk Gooch out of it. Ted was going to come home and help you."

"Poor kid."

"What am I going to sày, Jim? I don't want anyone to know that we were there to see Gooch."

"Did you see any of the posse?"

"No. But Pig and my father must have been with them."

"Strikes me that Denton's gang and the posse getting to that particular place at that particular time was a pretty long coincidence," Jim said grimly.

"That's the way it seems to me. I can't understand it. That's why I had to see you. Shouldn't I tell them that Ted and I just happened to be riding there and that the outlaws nearly ran us down?"

"It's the only thing you can do," he said. "The trouble is they'll know you are lying."

"Jim, darling, Ted can't be moved, and you must not come to the ranch. For one thing, you couldn't get away without getting Mom all excited. You've got to think of her heart."

"And for another you think I might take a shot at Pig Bratton," he said grimly.

"You know there would be trouble. You can't help Ted, Jim. If he lives I'll see that he is taken care of. If—if he dies I'll have the body taken to Star."

"I don't seem able to think very clear, but I can't grasp the idea of me stayin' here while my kid brother——"

"Jim, let me think for you for a while. No matter what happens I love you. I couldn't bear it if you were killed, and if you come there you'll be surrounded by enemies. It isn't only Pig. He's got half dozen men there I know are only hired gunmen."

"All right," he agreed reluctantly. "You go away with Gene Partee, but send word to Stell Baxter at Dysart first thing in the morning. If there's no word there I'll be at the Big Hat ranch."

"Thank you, Jim."

They looked into each other's eyes, and he took her into his arms and kissed her. They clung together for a long time.

"I never meant to let you do that, Jim," she said finally. "You mustn't do it again, ever."

He didn't promise. "You slip out through the pasture and wait for Gene Partee. You can trust him."

He had considerable explaining to do after Partee had got away. Somehow, Mrs. Dysart suspected that something was wrong.

Jim had never had a harder task than the one of staying away from his youngest brother. He had never realized how fond he was of Ted. The conviction grew upon him that the boy had been victim of a vicious frame-up, designed to destroy both Ted and Gooch. He regretted again and again that he had given his promise to Pauline, but he couldn't break it.

He didn't sleep. He was tossing on his bed when a handful

of gravel struck the window. He was on the floor in an instant. He saw a man standing a few feet from the wall. Jim motioned that he had heard, dressed hurriedly, all but his boots, which he carried, and tip-toed downstairs in his sock feet. He opened the back door, and when he stepped out he confronted Dave Lant.

It was the first time the men had stood face to face since their bitter quarrel when Jim had thrashed the older man. He was ashamed for that now, for Lant seemed suddenly to have become an old man. He had thinned, and his shoulders stooped dejectedly.

"Ted?" Jim whispered huskily.

"He's gone," Lant replied. "Never regained consciousness. I sent for the undertaker. You can meet the body in Star."

The words went through Jim like a knife. He wondered if the boy's fate had been his fault. Had be been too firm—or too tolerant? He didn't know.

"Wait a second," he said. "I've got to leave a note so Mom won't be worried. I don't want her to know till I get back."

Dave Lant had saddled the night horse for Jim and was waiting by the corral gate. They mounted silently and rode away. Jim was the first to speak.

"Were you there—when he was shot, I mean?"

Lant was slow about answering. "I was there," he said finally.

"You saw them?"

"Yes, but I didn't know Ted had been hit. Good God! It might have been my own daughter who got shot."

"Why didn't you follow them?"

"I didn't think anybody else saw them, and I didn't want to let anybody know they were there. I wanted to help them get away."

"Yes, I suppose you would figure that way. How did that frame-up originate?"

"Frame-up? There wasn't any frame-up," Lant protested.

"Let it go. I don't want to quarrel with you now."

"We got a tip that rustlers were on the range, and we went out to look for them. We jumped 'em with that bunch of cattle less than a quarter of a mile from where Ted was shot."

"Anybody there besides your own crew?"

"Four or five men from town."

"How come you didn't take Ted along with you?" Jim persisted.

"It was Pig's orders not to let him in on anything. Pig suspected him of being in with the Denton gang, since Gooch had joined 'em."

"How did anybody know Gooch had joined them?" Jim demanded harshly.

" Well, it was part of the tip. I thought Gooch was with 'em because I saw him plain two or three times before we give up the chase. But Pauline swears that Gooch was with her and Ted. Just the same it won't do any good for Pauline to tell anybody, because too many people saw him with Denton afterward. If he hadn't been with 'em they would have thought he belonged to the posse and shot him," Lant argued.

" So you don't want Pauline to clear Ted's name. You'd rather have people think Ted was killed while rustling cattle than have Pauline say anything that might interfere with her marriage to Pig Bratton. Is that it ? "

" I'm talkin' about Gooch," Lant said sullenly. " I did tell Pauline to keep her mouth shut about bein' there, but she won't do it. She didn't say whether she would keep quiet about Gooch or not. I hope she does."

" And I intend to see that she does talk," Jim declared. " If she won't I will. She told me what happened, and if I know her she won't deny it when I say she did."

" Why do you keep on bein' a fool ? " Lant rasped. " You're licked. Tee-totally an' completely licked. Why don't you sell out to Pig Bratton for what you can get, and keep your mother from becoming a pauper ? "

" No doubt you'd like to think I'm licked so you could see your future son-in-law as owner of the DX, but I'm not licked yet, Dave. Not by a hell of a lot. And you don't need to worry about my mother becoming a public charge. And by the way, there's a question I've been wanting to ask you. What about that five thousand dollar note you inveigled Mom into signing for you ? Has that ever been paid ? "

He could see his companion stiffen in the saddle. " It has been paid," Lant said stiltedly.

" How come you didn't ask me to sign with you ? " Jim persisted. " My name on a note is as good as hers. At that time you know I wouldn't have questioned your honesty."

Lant flinched. " The deal is over an' done with. I paid it off long ago. I don't want to discuss it any more."

" I would hardly think you would," Jim said softly. " Things are funny. Pauline said the other day that she remembered me best as being kind. And as a kid I thought of you as being honest."

" Shut up, damn you," Lant snarled. " I can't take much more."

" If it wasn't for Pauline you'd have to take a hell of a lot more. Was it you or Bratton took a shot at me the other evening ? "

" What ? Who shot at you when ?" Lant exclaimed.

" That answers it. It was Bratton. I hardly thought you would be cowardly enough to try to shoot a man in the back."

" I've got just one more thing to say to you, Jim," Lant said, trembling with wrath. " Pauline is goin' to marry Pig Bratton.

If you try to bust it up, or cause her any trouble I'll kill you myself, an' I won't shoot from behind any tree."

He gave his horse the spurs and galloped off into the night.

Jim was sorry that he had let his bitterness get away with him. He hadn't meant to quarrel with Dave again, but he couldn't forget that Dave was Bratton's man, and that he had been present when Ted was shot. He knew that the affair couldn't well have happened by accident. He was convinced that there had been a frame-up, and he wasn't sure that Dave Lant wasn't a part of it.

He had a bad moment when he entered the dimly lighted undertaking parlour in the early hours of the morning and looked down upon the face of his murdered brother. It didn't matter now that Ted had refused to heed his advice, and going his headstrong young way had squandered a fortune and brought the DX to the verge of ruin. All that counted was that his kid brother, whom he had loved, was dead, and that his murder cried aloud for vengeance.

One short look was enough. He gave the gaunt undertaker directions for the funeral and went out. The hard task of breaking the news to his mother was still before him. He recalled with cold dread how she had gone to pieces when his father died, and how for two long weeks they hadn't known whether she would live or die. All that had to be gone through again.

What about Gooch, he wondered. Would he hear about Ted's death and if so would he come to the funeral ? If he did would Pig Bratton try to have him arrested ? Gooch, he supposed, would now go to the dogs completely.

Before leaving town he woke up Dr. Wilkerson and asked him to come out to the ranch as quickly as he could. The doctor, he knew, was going to be needed.

Mrs. Dysart was already nervously pacing the room when he reached home.

" What's going on," she demanded. " Harvey asked me at breakfast if Pauline wasn't here yesterday. Said he thought sure it was her. And you going away in the night. Jim, has something happened to Gooch ? "

Always her concern was for Gooch, her favourite. But it wouldn't make the blow less severe when she learned about Ted. Jim put his hands on her shoulders.

" Gooch," he said, " is all right. But I've got bad news for you, Mom, so get yourself braced. You can't afford to go to pieces. There's been an accident. Ted—is dead."

She looked at him out of eyes that didn't appear to even see him. She gasped and went limp. He caught her in his arms.

CHAPTER X

A Funeral and a Fight

Ted Dysart was going to be buried in the Star cemetery beside a deceased sister and his father. The funeral was set for the third day after his death. Jim hadn't been in town since that first morning, and he didn't appear until an hour before the funeral. Libby Dysart was prostrated, and Dr. Wilkerson had told Jim that her condition though not necessarily fatal, was grave. Stella Baxter had volunteered to leave her store and the post office to stay with her.

Nothing had been heard from Gooch. In the outlaw hideaway it was not likely that he would hear of Ted's death for many weeks.

Jim dressed in his best black suit and rode to town with his six-gun in a buckled down saddle bag. He knew the town seethed with excitement, but not even a shred of gossip reached his ears.

A crowd, mostly friends of Ted and the Dysart family, had gathered when Jim arrived. They were mostly men. They hung around the outside in their uncomfortable best clothes, smoked cigarettes and talked in low voices. They made way respectfully when Jim crossed the yard and entered the building where the body of his brother lay.

Only the undertaker was present when Jim took his second and last look at the corpse. Ted looked more boyish now, much like he had looked at sixteen. No tear wetted the older brother's eye.

" Close the casket," he ordered curtly, and walked out.

Old Gene Partee joined him, muttering a few perfunctory words of comfort.

" What are they sayin' ? " Jim demanded.

" That it was an accident. Pauline saw to that. The story is that she and Ted got in the way of a posse chasin' rustlers. Ted's clear."

" What're they sayin' about Gooch ? "

Partee was slightly evasive. " They're wonderin' if he'll git here in time for the funeral."

" If he knew about it he would. What I want to know is what Bratton is saying ? "

" He's shouting his head off about rustlers. Stay clear of him, Jim—at least for to-day.

" Sort of take charge of things will you, Gene ? " Jim requested. " I've told 'em to make the services short. I want to see Polly a minute, then I'll be back."

He could see that Polly had been crying. She held out her

thin, white arms silently and he went to her. He had a bad few minutes trying to fight back the tears.

"I'm so sorry for you, Jim, and for your mother," Polly said. "I've never wanted so badly to get up as I do now. Maybe I could help. But I can't do the littlest thing."

"You help a lot just by being here, Polly," he said. "You're wonderful. If all the world was as sweet and good as you are there wouldn't be any trouble." He kissed her tenderly.

It was then he became aware of the figure standing over by the window. "Pauline!" he said. "I didn't know you were here."

"I've been here a long time," she said. "I agree with everything you said about Polly. I think she's wonderul. How is your mother?"

"I'm worried. If I could get hold of Gooch I think she's snap out of it."

"I'm coming out to-morrow," she said. "Earlier if I'm needed."

"To-morrow will be fine."

They were looking at each other as they talked, and they didn't notice Polly's intent gaze.

"Isn't it almost time for you to go?" Polly asked.

"Yes, it is," Pauline said with a glance at the clock. "Let's go, Jim."

The crowd had increased. There were to be open air services, then the short drive to the cemetery. Ted had been popular. Jim looked over the crowd, wondering if Pig Bratton would be there. He saw that he was. He was standing with several Star business men at one side. Half a dozen of his tough looking punchers stood at the back. Any one of them, Jim thought bitterly, might be the one who had fired the fatal shot. He couldn't order them to leave, but he wanted to.

Most of the crowd had to stand, but there were a few benches for the mourners and the aged. Jim was the only relative, and a bench had been reserved for him. Pauline, with a dark veil drawn over her face, and looking neither to right nor left sat down beside him. Dave Lant pressed through the crowd and sat on the other side of Pauline. He didn't look toward Jim; didn't take his eyes from the casket.

Dave Lant didn't speak to Jim at the cemetery either. They had parted with hot words, and neither were the kind to make concessions. "Come on, Pauline," Lant said when it was over. "I'll ride with you to the ranch."

Pauline spoke to Jim without raising her veil. "Good-bye, Jim, Be careful."

Jim rode to the Amboy with Gene Partee. They had a couple of drinks. Jim felt the need for more, but his companion urged him to go slow.

An argument broke out suddenly in the back of the saloon where Bratton's punchers and a number of other men were congregated.

"I tell you the only reason Ted Dysart wasn't with his brother and the rest o' them rustlers was because he happened tuh bump into the Lant gal an' couldn't git away from her. That's why there was a slip-up in their plans."

"Shut up, you fool," somebody hissed fearfully.

Jim Dysart spun away from the bar and strode through the crowd. "Who said that?" he demanded icily.

Pig Bratton stepped out from nowhere. "I think it was one of my men, Dysart," he said. "He's probably drunk."

"Drunk or sober no man can say that about my brother," Jim said. "I want him."

The Big Hat punchers were grouped behind their boss, but none of them raised his voice.

"Which brother?" Pig Bratton asked blandly.

White with anger, Jim struck. Pig Bratton had seen what devastation Jim's fist could wreak when Jim had hit Gooch. He made sure that his face wasn't there, and Jim's fist glided harmlessly past the man's face. Then Jim grunted from pain as Pig's blow caught him hard in the pit of the stomach.

For a moment Jim was paralyzed by the pain. His arms dropped uselessly at his sides, and his knees buckled. He felt horribly sick. Then, Biff! Bam! Bratton's fists struck him on one side of the head and then the other. He went down.

Jim thought that he would never get up. His head clanged, and his stomach was in turmoil. The room was black. He could see nothing. One of the Big Hat punchers, Marry Bradley by name, and the man who had started the trouble, leaped forward to stamp on the prostrate man.

"Back up, Bradley," came the steady voice of old Gene Partee, "or I'll blow yore head off."

The Big Hat punchers backed away hastily as they saw the sawed-off shotgun the bartender had passed to Partee when the fracas started.

"Stay back, you men," Pig ordered. "I'll finish this—if it needs any finishing."

The blackness began to disappear from Jim's brain. He saw the sawdust covered floor, then the boots and trouser legs of the men. He got his knees under him, rested there for a moment with his knees drawn up, and his elbows on the floor. He raised up on his hands, then altogether on his knees, and finally got one foot under him.

Pig Bratton stepped forward and drove his fist hard against Jim's jaw as he tried to rise. Again Jim sprawled upon the floor.

"That was dirty, Bratton," Gene Partee said. Several old timers, and younger men as well, were lined up alongside Partee. Among them was Tex Devore, a man of fifty who had once been Partee's foreman. He was a thin, tall, dark man and was one of the few men besides the Big Hat crew who wore a six-gun.

"Don't try it again," Devore added his warning to Partee's.

Jim didn't move quickly. Somehow that last blow had cleared rather than muddled his brain. He knew now who he had to fight, and how. Hurt as he was he realized that he was going to have to take more punishment. Far more. But his hate went through him like a powerful stimulant. He repeated his movements getting up—until he had one foot solidly planted. Then he suddenly surged to his feet and charged.

It was Pig Bratton taken unaware this time. He threw up his hands, but too late. Jim's right struck the end of his chin, turned him a quarter round. Then a short, ripping left landed under the heart. It hurt. For a split second Bratton couldn't get his breath. Then he leaped back.

Jim knew that he was still weak; otherwise Pig would have showed more damage. He could only hope that as the fight progressed his strength would come back. In the meantime he must husband his resources, fight a defensive battle, feign more damage than he felt.

Pig was in again with rights and lefts, but those two blows had taught him respect for his foe's power. Jim could still hit and hurt. Pig planned his campaign craftily—and exactly as Jim wanted him to fight. He swung no more haymakers, preferring to further weaken his enemy by fast, staccato jabs to the face while taking care that Dysart didn't reach him.

Jim took all the punches his enemy could throw. They were painful. They puffed out his lips and loosened his teeth. They brought out purple bruises on his cheeks, and blood dripped steadily from his nostrils. He could stand the pain. He was no longer nauseated and his brain was now completely clear. He called out his last reserve of stamina. Despite the painful pummelling he felt strength flowing back. His breathing was laboured, but his lungs no longer seemed filled with liquid fire.

He even noted the distress upon the faces of his friends. They thought he had no chance and was taking needless punishment. He could see Gene Partee's bearded lips working, as though Gene were silently pleading with him to quit.

Still he fought on, waiting for that inevitable moment of carelessness upon the part of his adversary. If he could hold out until that arrived he might still have a chance. But he knew that he must hit hard enough when the time did come to instantly turn the tide of battle; to put Pig immediately on upon the defensive. And then he would have to gather strength enough from somewhere to go on and finish the fight; beat his enemy into sudden submission. Anything short of that would be defeat.

Then the moment came. Twice Jim had struck Pig's biceps with short, bruising blows. Pig, seeing his foe staggering in near helplessness dropped his arm for an instant to relax the

tortured muscles. He had not noticed that however the fight went Jim's feet were always in place, his weight balanced.

Even as Pig's arm fell Jim lashed out. He could hit equally hard with either hand. His left thudded against the side of Pig's mouth. Pig tried to clinch. Jim's left hand slid around his foe's neck. He jerked Bratton into him and his right ripped upward twice. Two blows, each with the force of a steam-driven piston behind them caught Pig Bratton under the chin. The first lifted the man's chin high, the second caught him squarely on the Adam's-apple, a devastating, paralyzing blow which cut off Bratton's breath, his voice, and paralyzed his will. He knew only pain. Then as the man's knees sagged, Jim stepped back and threw all his power into a single punch. It went straight to the button.

Pig Bratton went down, flopped once, and stayed down, gasping frenziedly for breath.

"By God, yuh got him!" Gene Partee croaked, dancing about and handling the sawn-off shotgun so carelessly that the Big Hat punchers scattered like quail.

Jim leaned across a pool table and pumped air into his tortured lungs. Inwardly he glowed with elation. He had whipped Pig Bratton; whipped him until he knew that never again would Pig face him with naked fists. He wanted to finish the thing by singling out the man whose remark had started the row, but he was too spent. That settlement would have to remain in abeyance. Presently he found himself being towed to the washroom by Partee and Devore. Both were talking at once, neither one being able to finish a sentence.

"I never thought you could do it after that first knock-down," old Gene said, "but when you got in that first lick——" What word Partee intended to utter he never knew, for the sentence was punctuated by a louder sound than he could hope to make. In his excitement he thumped the bottom of an upended empty beer keg with the butt of the shotgun, and both barrels went off, barely missing blowing the old cowman's head off, and tearing a gaping hole in the ceiling.

"You better cool down, Gene," Tex Devore advised dryly. "You sure raised the roof with that one."

Jim got the bleeding stopped at last, but his face was a mass of cuts and bruises, the inside of his mouth was sore, and he couldn't see at all out of one eye, and very little out of the other.

He was no longer elated by his victory. Ted was dead. Gooch's reputation gone, and he could foresee clearly that if Bratton was going to claim he had lost cattle, that it would not be long until Jim's name, too, was linked with that of the outlaw, Cy Denton.

CHAPTER XI

Pauline Hits the Dirt

Dave Lant had known better than try to interfere with his daughter until after Fred Dysart's funeral, but on the way home he took her to task.

"I feel bad about Ted gittin' killed, too," he said. "I liked the boy, but now that it's over I want no truck with the DX."

"I'm going up there to-morrow to see if there is anything I can do for Mrs. Dysart," the girl stated calmly.

"They don't need your help, and you're goin' will only cause trouble. I want you to stay away," he commended.

"Sorry, Dad, but I gave my word. She's been almost as much of a mother to me as she has Jim, Gooch, and Ted. I'm heartily ashamed of the way I've treated her since I came home."

"I'll assume responsibility for that," he said loftily. "I went up there to tell Jim his brother was dead, and the only thanks I got was threats and insults. I order you to stay clear of Jim Dysart."

"Is it because you hate Jim, or because you're afraid we'll offend Pig Bratton ?"

"You told me you were going to marry Pig."

"I know I did, and I intend to keep my word unless he tries to curtail all my freedom. If he says I can't visit Mom Dysart then I'll not marry him."

"That ain't the way to look at it," he argued desperately. "We're through with the DX now, an' we're tied up with the Big Hat. You'll only get into more trouble. Look what happened when you went messing around where you didn't belong. It might have been you killed instead of Ted."

"I don't want to argue, Dad," she said wearily. "I'm going to the DX to-morrow and that's all there is to it."

She expected to see Pig at the ranch that evening, but he didn't show up. She saw the half-dozen tough punchers whom she didn't like, and there was a noticeable air of sullen, veiled excitement around them. There was one in particular whom she disliked, one Marr Bradley, and he seemed to be doing a lot of busy talking.

Her father called her just before his usual bedtime. "I say again you'd better stay away from the DX," he said. "Jim and Pig had a fight in town to-day after the funeral."

"Oh ! Was Jim hurt ? " she cried out before she took time to think.

Dave Lant's surprised gaze lingered on her face while a wave of rich colour swept up to her hair. "They were both hurt," he said without accent. "Jim licked."

"I'm glad of that," she said defiantly.

Lant said no more. He knocked the ashes out of his evening pipe and laboriously climbed the stairs.

Pauline regretted now that she had displayed her real feelings. Her father was no fool. He couldn't fail to realize that she thought more of Jim Dysart than she did of Pig Bratton. She felt a queer trembling all through her body, such as she sometimes felt when about to mount a colt which she wasn't sure she could ride—only vastly more so. It was in the air that something tragic was going to happen, and she had a deepseated feeling that all unwittingly some action of hers had laid the bomb that was sure to explode.

She still couldn't go back on her word. She watched her father ride away with the other men the next morning then she went out to the stable to saddle her pony. To her angry amazement there wasn't a horse in the barn or in the corral. Every animal had been turned into the horse pasture; something she hadn't known to happen since she had been home. That was little and petty, something utterly unworthy of Dave Lant, and it made her only the more determined.

She picked up a bridle and taking a small pan of oats went into the pasture. Ranch horses weren't accustomed to being anywhere except in a corral, and they kept circling away from her with mild, curious snort. Finally, however, the rattling of the oats in the pan enticed a small brown mare to come close enough for her to loop the reins around the mare's neck. The rest was easy.

She mounted the mare bareback, drove in the rest of the horses and caught the one she wanted; but she had wasted more than an hour and wore her temper to a sawtoothed edge.

She was still fuming as she reached for the latigo and cinched the saddle tighter than it really needed to be. Then, as she reached for the stirrups, she saw Pig Bratton. The lower part of his face was bruised and swollen, and he wore several patches of court plaster. "Where are you going?" Pig demanded.

"None of your business," she answered like an angry, impudent little girl. She already had the stirrup. She shoved her toe into it, and reined the horse aside as she swung up, as she saw Pig make a lunge for the horse's head. The horse was none too gentle, it had been cinched too tightly, and as it whirled she accidently raked down across its hip with her right spur.

The saddle horse "swallowed his head," and rose high in the air. It let out a tremendous "Waugh!" as it came down, and Pauline missed the stirrup. She hung far over one side as the horse went up again. She saw the earth going away from her, then come rushing back. As the horse's front feet struck

the ground, with its rear end still elevated at a forty-five degree angle the girl was jarred completely loose. She landed on the back of her head and her shoulders in the hard-packed floor of the corral and pain shrieked through every nerve.

She rolled swiftly but agonizedly to one side to avoid the hooves of the still bucking horse, then groaned and lay still.

Pig Bratton laughed immoderately. " Oh, you could have seen yourself fannin' the atmosphere," he spluttered through his laughter. " If you could only see your face."

" Your own face is nothing to rave about," she got out angrily.

He stood there with his hands on his hips, convulsed by laughter until she turned over on her face. She wanted to get up, but the slightest movement was sheer torture. She saw him catch the horse and lead it away, and then she got painfully to her feet. She had been bucked off before, but she had never had such a hard, jarring fall in her life. She staggered over to the fence and leaned against it for a minute before she could go on.

She saw Pig unsaddle the horse and let it trot back into the pasture. There was no use to protest, and the way she felt then she wouldn't be able to ride again that day.

Seeing him coming back she started for the house. He overtook her before she was half across the yard.

" Where were you going ? " he demanded, and the laughter was all gone from his voice.

" To the DX," she said bluntly.

" And now you won't be able to go. Too bad, because it was the only chance you'll ever have."

" What do you mean by that ? "

" Just what I say. I won't have you going there until I break the Dysarts and get control of it myself."

Pauline reached the porch and clung to one of its pillars for a moment to rest. " My father works for you, but since when have you been giving me orders ? " she said.

" Since right now," he said harshly. " Go on into the house. I want to talk to you."

She was sore and dirty and covered with dust. His battered face was a caricature. They might talk marriage, she thought grimly, but there could be no pretence to romance about it. She sank gratefully into a chair and waited for him to go on. He remained standing, his feet planted far apart, hands resting belligerently upon his hips. " It's understood that we're going to get married, isn't it ? " he demanded.

" Is it ? "

" Don't act coy with me," he thundered. " I thought it was understood."

" You asked me, but I don't remember saying yes."

" I wanted you to say yes willingly, but I hold cards enough that you won't say no," he stated. " I've never made but one

request since you came back here to live, that is that you stay away from Jim Dysart and the DX. In spite of that you've been going there, and you were going again to-day. Get it straight now. You're not to go there again."

"Do you want to marry me?" she asked.

"Hunh? Of course I do. I'm crazy about you. I want you more than anything in the world, and I sure as hell want and intend to be the only man in this country with real influence. I intend to make even the proudest of 'em bow down to me when I tell 'em to. But I want you more than that. Any woman should be flattered," he declared naively.

"Oh, I am," she said sardonically. "I'm flattered to death. But let's be practical for a moment. I savvy that you can't be the big man you want to be until you're completely master of the range. The key to that is the DX. You hate Jim Dysart because he won't give way to you—'bow down' as you so neatly put it. Hasn't it occurred to you that I might get the DX for you a lot easier than you can get for yourself?"

"I don't want it that way," he yelled. "I'm going to smash Jim Dysart, grind his face into the dirt. If I can't drive him to suicide or into the penitentiary I'll kill him."

"Why, you are insane," she said wonderingly.

"I'm the sanest man you ever saw. I know how to get what I want. Now is it understood that you see nothing more of the Dysarts, and that we get married next month?"

Pauline had never really been afraid of the man, but she was now. But she couldn't surrender everything.

"I'll marry you if you wish, but I'll take no orders from you, Pig, either before or after we are married. Is that clear?"

He looked at her as if he couldn't believe his ears.

"Maybe you don't realize that I wouldn't be so sure of myself if I didn't have a——"

"If you didn't have a hold over my father," she interrupted. "I'm taking that into account. I'm gambling my hand that you want me more than you want to humiliate him, or more than you want to keep me away from the DX."

"You win," he said. "But that don't keep me from removing temptation from you, just as quick as possible. And I'm not fooled about who you want to go there to see."

He strode out before she could reply. She was sick now, as well as sore. She hadn't thought that anyone knew how she felt about Jim. Did she wear her heart on her sleeve so that even a man like Pig Bratton could see it? Or was his eyes sharpened by jealousy?

If she persisted in going to the DX she would only increase Jim's danger. She would have to break her word about going there to-day, and going later could only make more trouble. I spite of her defiance Pig had won. She would do her best not to see Jim again.

CHAPTER XII

A Risky Surrender

Jim couldn't go back to see Polly looking as he did. He asked Gene Partee to make excuses for him, and started for his horse.

"You said you wanted to hire a good man, didn't you?" Partee asked.

"Yes. Why?"

"I thought you did, so I asked Tex if he couldn't get off for a little while an' he said he could."

"You," Jim said with emotion, "are what I call a couple of friends. But I want you to know what you're up against, Tex. This is no silk glove range war. I was shot at from the brush the other day, and it was just luck the bushwhacker missed. You'll be up against the same thing."

"I've been up against it before," Tex said.

"If I was a younger man I'd be up there too," Partee said.

"But Bratton owes you money. You can't afford to antagonize him," Jim objected.

"I wish to Gawd I'd never sold him the Big Hat," Partee said. "I've just been thinking lately. If that pig can run you out an' git the DX he'll control the whole country. What's to prevent him then from failin' to meet his payments to me?"

"But you could take the property back."

"Sure I could. An' be squeezed tighter than you are now. I'm an old man, an' he knows it. I wouldn't have a chance. We've underestimated Mr. Pig Bratton."

Jim feared that his appearance would give his mother too much of a shock and decided to spend the night in the bunk-house. He sent Tex inside to tell Stella Baxter why he wasn't coming in.

Tex returned in a few minutes, and Stella was with him.

"Grandma in Heaven! Look at you!" Stella exclaimed. "You ought to be in the hospital. Let me get you some raw beef for them eyes."

"In a minute," he said. "How's Mom?"

"She's quite a lot better since——" she stopped, with a sideways glance at Tex. "Since noon," she finished.

"What happened? You can say anything before Tex that you would say before me."

"All right then. Since Gooch was here."

"Gooch here? Which way did he go? How long was he here?"

"He was here about two hours," Stella replied, "and he didn't say where he was goin'. He just talked to his mother a long time, and it do her a lot of good."

" He had heard about Ted, then ? "

" It seems so. All he said to me was when he came. He said, ' I figger I wouldn't be too popular around this country so I thought I'd come in an' see Mom while everybody else was at the funeral.' "

Jim made note of one thing. Gooch was in communication with someone close around : Instead of going with the Denton gang to some faraway hideout he was probably hiding somewhere within a half day's ride.

Jim kept raw beef steak over his eye most of the night, and in the morning he could see fairly well. He was still too sore, however, to work. Both Tex and Stella insisted that he remain quietly in the bunkhouse. Tex rode out on the range to see how Pee-wee Rust and Amos Kittel were getting along. It was a relief to Jim to know that the DX again had a capable man like Tex Devore on the job. It would no longer be easy for rustlers to get away with anything.

Another reason for him staying at home was that Pauline had promised to come that day, and he wanted to see her. But as the hours passed and no sign of her his spirits sank lower and lower. He had never known her to break her word, but if she didn't come it could only be because her father and Pig Bratton had persuaded her not to. Perhaps she was angry with him for getting into a fight with Bratton.

Still, he didn't give up all hope until the sun went down. He knew then, somehow, that she wouldn't visit the DX again.

It was long past dark when he heard someone enter the bunkhouse.

" Gimme a light somebody " Jim recognised Tex Devore's voice. Before Jim could move old Jeff Teeters, who slept closest to the lamp, made a light.

Tex looked tired. Much as he wanted a report Jim would not violate the Western code of hospitality, whether to stranger or employee. " Had supper ? " he queried.

" Nor dinner," Tex answered succinctly. " But never mind that. I'll get me a bite later."

Old Jeff Teeters crawled out of bed and began pulling on his clothes. " Too late to rouse the cook," he said. " I'll cook yuh something, Tex, while yuh talk."

Tex sat down and began to pull off his boots. " Bring it in will yuh, Jeff ? " he requested. " These boots are killin' me. I been a farmer for the last two years an' ain't used to 'em. An' I ain't used to the kind o' ride I took to-day."

" How're the boys ? " Jim asked.

" Dunno. Didn't see 'em. Oh, here's a note I found at camp. Kinda hard to make out, but maybe you kin read it."

He handed over a piece of strong brown wrapping paper evidently torn from a larger piece. Jim recognized old Peewee's handwriting in the scrawled lines.

" Jim. Found track ove nother bunch stolenn cows headin east gonna foller um to hell and back Pee-wee."

Jim glanced up questioningly.

" No date," Tex said. " It was tacked on to the tent pole. Didn't say whether Pee-wee had left before Amos Kittel got there or not, but I reckon he had or he'd have mentioned Amos. I lit out east an' finally picked up what I thought might be tracks, but I lost 'em again. Rode as long as I could, but I didn't see no sign o' Pee-wee."

Jim swore. " That old cuss will get himself killed sure as shootin'," he said with genuine concern. The loss of the cattle, however much it hurt, was not as important as the fact that old Pee-wee might overhaul the rustlers and get killed.

" Since I didn't see Kittel I figger he may have read the note an' overtook Pee-wee," Tex said. " Amos ain't so damned brave as Pee-wee, an' he may keep 'em out of trouble. Hey, where you goin' ? "

Jim had started to dress. " To pick up the trail where you left off," he said.

" Well," Tex groaned, " I guess I better pull these damn' boots back on."

" Don't be foolish. You got to get some rest: I'll take along a packhorse an' some grub. You take over till I get back."

" But with your mother sick, and all——" Tex objected.

" I think she'll make it all right now. I won't be gone long—three days at the outside. If I can't run across anything in that time it'll be hopeless."

Both Jeff Teeters and Harvey Coltrin pleaded to go along. Jim knew that Teeters, in particular, would be a good man, but that was a one man job. First consideration was to keep his men out of trouble if he could.

Within an hour from the time of Tex's return Jim was in the saddle, heading for the place where Tex had last seen sign. He was there a little before daybreak, long enough to rest his horse and cook his own breakfast before it became light.

As before, the trail had led across the upper neck of the Big Hat range, but he was now in a mountainous country well beyond Lehi Valley.

The big question pounding at his brain was : How deep had Gooch got into this business ? He couldn't believe that his brother would steal from his own mother, and yet Gooch had inveigled her out of money which he must have known he would never pay back. Gooch's presence at the ranch while Ted's funeral was going on looked bad.

What would he do if he found Gooch with the stolen cattle ? That question pounded relentlessly at his brain. Despite the anger the mere thought of it made him feel he knew that he would do nothing. Already Gooch's gambling and rowdiness had brought the DX to the verge of ruin, but he was still a brother.

There seemed to be hundreds of canyons ahead. The stolen cattle might be in any one of them, or they might already be clear out of the country. Jim rode on a few miles, then realized that he must change tactics. Although the cattle had been driven north he must ride back and forth, east and west, if he hoped to pick up their now nearly cold trail.

Two hours later he saw where a bunch of cattle had crossed a creek after coming out of a thick patch of timber. It was impossible to tell when, nor could he tell whether they had been driven or not, yet from the number of tracks the indications were they had. On the range cattle seldom were seen in such large bunches.

They had turned up the creek, following a network of trails along the sidehill which frequently led through long patches of aspen. If the cattle had been driven they had certainly not been hurried.

Then, suddenly, Jim came upon the remnants of a campfire. The ashes were long since cold, but from the trampled grass and the number of tin cans that had been opened he knew there must have been six or eight men in the party. And there were signs, too, that somebody else had investigated those ashes before him! That, in all probability was Pee-wee and Amos Kittel.

Excitement stirred his brain. He was close to something. His chief fear was that he had missed his two employees if they had turned back. Anxious as he was to go on he took time to scan every inch of the ground for some tangible clue. Presently he found it. Half covered in the grass was something glistening and white. He picked it up. It was a bandana holder, carved from the shank bone of a sheep. The front of it was carved in the shape of a three leaved clover. It belonged to Gooch!

Jim leaned against a tree and thought. Deeply. If his own brother would steal from him there was little use to go on. He would just have to swallow his loss this time. But he would see Gooch sometime, and when he did——

There was still the possibility that tough, brash old Pee-wee Rust might follow the rustlers and get into trouble. Jim couldn't let Pee-wee down. He would have to go on.

Tracking was easy so long as the trail followed that creek, and the rustlers were obviously taking their time; apparently feeling safe from pursuit. It was some time before he deduced that the rustlers had split the cattle into several small bunches in a final effort to checkmate any possible attempt to follow them. The time was getting away. It was after sundown when he reached the top of the highest divide in the country, one which, he surmised, marked the boundary line between two states.

As nearly as he could make out the cattle had been driven due west along the top of the high ridge to where a spur ridge

jutted straight off to the north. The angle between the two ridges was covered with heavy timber. Late as it was there was little use to plunge into that, even though it seemed certain the cattle had been driven into the timber.

The best chance to get a view of the country was to follow the top of the spur ridge, even though he realized that he might stand out in silhouette like a flower-pot on a window sill.

He had gone less than a mile and the evening shadows were thickening rapidly when he stopped, and an excited gasp escaped his lips. Below him stretched a long, grassy meadow, winding through the timber like a snake, and grazing along it was a small herd of cattle, well over a hundred in number! Toward the upper end of the meadow, but on the other side, a camp-fire twinkled through the timber.

Some of the cattle were lying down, indicating to Jim that they were tired after a long drive. He had no doubt at all these were his own cattle.

He made up his mind instantly what to do. It was his property and he was not going to turn back without making an effort to retrieve it, even if it meant risking his life.

The rustlers would be prepared to fight. He knew that. He couldn't take the cattle from them by force. Trying to steal the herd away from them would be equally futile. He had but one chance, a bold, daring demand. Gooch's presence might help—and it might be the worst possible thing.

He guided his horse down off the ridge through timber so thick that sometimes he had difficulty finding space enough to squeeze his packhorse through. By the time he reached the meadow it was so dark he could scarcely see twenty feet ahead of him.

It was some little time before he located the fire again, but then it was an unfailing beacon to get him where he wanted to go. He realized that Cy Denton had the reputation of being ruthless; a man who would as soon shoot as not. He knew that he might be a dead man in a matter of minutes, but he went on. And he whistled loudly as he went.

There had been movement around the camp-fire, and when he saw the figures there freeze into immobility he knew they had heard his whistle. But he continued to whistle, "Comin' through the Rye."

He saw the figures suddenly leave the fire and fade into the night. The next few moments might be his last. Any instant a bullet from the dark might find his body. But he kept on.

He rode into the radius of the fire and stopped. "Where the hell is everybody?" he called.

"Step down from there, stranger, and stand out away from your horses with your hands up," a steely voice spoke from the darkness.

CHAPTER XIII

The Law of the Range

Dave Lant was amazed to find his daughter in bed in the daytime. Usually she was so healthy that she seemed to resent even the hours she had to spend in bed at night.

"What's wrong?" he asked anxiously.

"Coop bucked me off," she said.

"Why I thought he was safe. And I thought you could ride him if he did buck. Are you sure there are no bones broken?"

There was genuine solicitude in his voice, and Pauline felt a sudden wave of affection for him.

"I'm all right, Dad," she assured him. "Just bruised and sore. That corral is mighty hard when you pound it with the back of your neck."

"Where were you going?" he asked.

"To the DX. You heard me promise Jim I'd visit his mother to-day. Guess I'll have to break my promise."

"You should stay away from there."

"We won't argue any more about it," she said wearily. "I'll stay home."

"Pig said anything?"

"Plenty. I told him I'd marry him."

"You don't like him, do you?"

"Until recently I might have done."

"Now, when you find out you despise him, you agree to marry him."

Pauline was too shaken up to have much emotional endurance. "Oh, Dad," she cried suddenly, and began to sob.

Lant watched her unhappily. He loved his daughter dearly, but he wasn't in the habit of petting her much. He felt awkward. "Don't, Paul," he pleaded finally. "I can't stand to see you cry like that. You know I'd do anything in the world to make you happy."

She controlled herself with an effort. "I know, Dad. I'm sorry. I don't often go off the deep end like this, now do I?"

"You've been a real cowhand ever since your mother died," he said, giving her the highest words of approval he knew. "But, dammit, we've got to get this marriage business straightened out."

"It's all settled, Dad. I'll marry Pig soon."

"No, you won't," he declared. "Not if you hate him. Why should you?"

Her face lightened for a moment, then looked depressed. "Maybe you'd better tell me," she said. "We didn't used to keep things from each other."

" So that's it. Damn him, he's broke his word, and told you——"

" He has told me nothing that I didn't know."

" You knew that he—that he——"

" Had some sort of hold over you ? Yes. I'm sorry, Dad, but I did a bit of listening one time. Not enough to know any details, but I learned then there was something. It doesn't matter what it was. I owe it to you to protect you in any way I can. If it means marrying Pig I'll gladly do it."

" I really thought Bratton would be a good match for you, and I didn't dream you cared for anybody else."

" Who said I did ? "

" I'm not blind. I used to think you might be stuck on one of the younger Dysart boys, and I didn't like it. I hoped it would be Ted instead of Gooch if you had to fall for one of 'em but I didn't want either one of 'em for a son-in-law. That was one reason I sent you away to school."

" Of course I liked them, but, Dad, I never had the slightest intention of falling in love with them."

" What about Jim ? " She couldn't answer, and a blush flooded slowly upward from her throat.

" You see," he said, " your old man ain't exactly blind. You're in love with Jim Dysart."

" But I'd never marry him, Dad, you know that. I'd never marry a man who was your enemy. Besides, you know that Jim is tied to Polly Bryan. He wouldn't hurt Polly by marrying anyone else, and she may live for years and years. Oh, why talk about ? " she cried.

" We've got to git it settled, that's why. It may be Jim is tied to Polly. I happen to know what few others do, that Jim has provided for Polly and her mother for years. It don't alter the fact you're in love with him. Is he in love with you ? "

Her eyes were downcast, her cheeks still unnaturally red. " Yes," she admitted in a whisper.

" Maybe Polly will stand between you, but I won't," Dave Lant declared. " Jim is a fine man. The finest I know."

" But, Dad, I thought——"

" Sure, we fought, and he licked me. He's not perfect, an' he can say a lot of stingin' things. He made me plenty mad, but even when I cussed him I knew he was right. Quittin' the DX at a time when they needed me was the act of a coward."

" Dad, don't say that. I won't let anyone, even yourself, call you a coward."

" But it's true."

" Pig Bratton forced you to come and work for him, didn't he ? "

" Yes. I guess we've beat around the bush enough. I made up my mind long ago that if you ever learned the truth I'd kill myself. I even planned——"

" Dad ! " Pauline cried out in protest. She threw her arms

around him wildly. " Don't you know that nothing you could have done would hurt me as much as that ? If you've broken the law I'll stand by you. Even if they send you to prison I'll stand up in court and tell them I'm proud to be your daughter. But I couldn't stand it if you just got out of the world like a sneak and a coward."

Lant was visibly moved. For a long time neither of them could speak. " I might have known you'd feel that way," he said at length. " Prison is what it'll be if I defy Bratton."

" Tell me," she ordered.

" I've been a good cowman," he said, " but like a lot of us I've always been a child in business. Never could save any money. I suppose I'm a lot to blame for the Dysart boys goin' to the bad. They thought I was all right, and they knew how I used to play poker and twenty-one, an' they took it up when they were only little kids. But the one thing I wanted was for you to have an education. To be a lady. I wanted to send you to the best schools in the land, and it took money."

" Go on," she said, " I can take it."

" When a couple of slick fellows came around with a get-rich-quick proposition in oil, and I saw some of the best business men I knew investin' in it, I thought it was my big chance. The trouble was I had no money, but I did know a way to git it. I asked Libby Dysart to sign a note with me, and without askin' any questions at all she did."

" Oh. Dad, you mean that you cheated Libby Dysart," the girl moaned.

" No. I'd have robbed a bank to keep from doin' that. When the oil investment blew up I knew I had to do something, and for a while I didn't know what. Then just about that time I got acquainted with Pig Bratton. He told me about a herd of cattle that could be bought cheap. Well, I got the impression there was something wrong and that he didn't want to burn his fingers, but I was desperate.

" I got a lay-off and went and looked at the cattle. There were only two men with 'em, an' they acted funny. I didn't have any money, but I knew where I could sell 'em. The buyer knew me, an' he would never question me if I told him the stuff was mine.

" I didn't have any idea at all the fellows would let me take 'em without payin' for 'em, but when I told 'em I only had two hundred dollars to bind the bargain, but would come back and pay 'em the rest as soon as I got the money they seemed glad to have me take the stuff off their hands.

" I sold the cattle without any trouble at all, and they were shipped East to Omaha. I made a nice profit. But when I went back to find the men I'd bought 'em from they wasn't there. I've never seen 'em since."

" So you kept all the money, and paid off the note Mrs. Dysart had signed," Pauline said.

" That's what happened, Paul. Only one man ever knew that I had sold stolen cattle and pocketed the money. That was Pig Bratton. I don't know to this day who those cattle belonged to originally, but he does. If he ever tells 'em I go over the road."

" Dad, didn't it ever occur to you that Pig Bratton must have framed the whole thing ? He must have been in with the men who stole those cows."

" May have been. I've thought of it, but there's certainly no proof. Anyway, when he asked me to quit the DX an' work for him I had to do it. An' he's been bearin' down ever since. Now you know."

" I know I've got to marry him," she said.

" I'd kill him," Dave Lant said slowly, " except for one thing. I happen to know that if anything happened to him he has papers in the Star Bank that would expose me. He's already told me that."

" You mustn't think of such a thing. There's only one thing for us to do, and I'll do it."

" If Jim was free to marry I'd say for you to marry him to-morrow an' let Pig do his damndest," Lant said helplessly.

" But he's not. He's never asked me to marry him, and I certainly couldn't ask him. But I do wish there was some way to make Pig let up on the DX. Will he break Jim, Dad ? "

" Jim ain't got a chance. Pig has got him penned in."

" It's the pig that ought to be in the pen," Pauline remarked.

" So far Jim has had some use of the Grizzly Meadows, but now Pig says he is going to get a government or a state lease on that, an' it'll mean the finish of the DX."

" Jim's got some good friends, men like Gene Partee. Can't they do anything ? "

" I don't see what. If you do marry Pig—an' God knows I hate to think of you doin' it—you might be able to get him let up on Jim, but I doubt it. He wants to make the DX the heart and core of a cattle empire."

" Anyway, Dad, I'm glad we had this talk. Now we understand each other. And no more talk about suicide, or killing Pig Bratton."

" I'll be goin' now," Lant said. " That sounds like Pig out to the barn now."

Pauline was still so sore the following morning that she could scarcely drag herself from the bed. She waited until she was sure the riders had all left the place before she tried to move. Her father had kept Pig from trying to see her, and that morning he had assured her that Pig was returning to town.

Glancing out of her window she saw her father riding into the corral at full gallop. She seized the first thing she could and to throw on and hurried downstairs. He wasn't the kind of man to ride fast unless there was some pressing reason. He reached the house a moment after she got downstairs,

"Dad!" she cried, "What is it?"

"It's rustlers," he told her. "Cy Denton's gang have made another raid an' drove off a big bunch of DX cattle."

"DX cattle?" she gasped. "How do you know that?"

"I just saw Tex Devore. He's workin' for the DX now. He says Pee-wee Rust an' Aim Kittel got on their trail an' followed 'em nearly to the Montana line. Then Pee-wee sent Kittel back for help while he stayed watch. Tex found the trail, too, yesterday, an' it led right across our range. In fact he half accused Big Hat punchers of helpin' the rustlers."

"Dad. It isn't true, is it?"

"I don't know. At least not to my knowledge, but there are some pretty tough cases on the outfit, an' they don't pay a hell of a lot of attention to my orders."

"What are you going to do?"

"Tex put it up to me flat. In the old days when rustlers were operatin' every puncher turned out to help the others. Tex an' me have rode the same range for twenty years, me as the DX foreman, an' him for the Big Hat. He said he had come for help. What could I do?"

"You've got to go along, Dad. But be careful."

"Sure," he said smilingly. "Tex said that Jim struck out last night to try pick up the trail, but he missed meetin' Kittel."

"Oh!" The girl's face went white from fear.

"Jim's too level-headed to tackle a crew of outlaws alone," Lant assured her. "He'll hold off till Tex arrives with help. Tex sent Kittel on down to Star to have Gene Partee raise a bigger posse. We may have to follow Denton to hell, so don't be alarmed if I don't git back for a few days."

"Dad," Pauline cried wildly. "Don't go. No matter what Tex Devore thinks of you, don't go." She couldn't voice the terrible apprehensions that were in her mind. He wouldn't kill himself, but if he could get in the way of some rustler's bullet—

He stooped to kiss her.

"This is one job I can't crawl out of," he said. "Tex is waitin' for me, an' nobody has ever yet called me a coward."

CHAPTER XIV

The Hole of Death

Jim wasted no time obeying the orders of the unseen outlaw to dismount and elevate his hands. The next few minutes, he knew, might well decide his fate.

Men began to appear from every side. Jim didn't have to guess as to the identity of the leader; a smooth-faced man

somewhere around thirty, somewhat on the portly side. The man's face was round and almost babyish, his light-brown hair inclined to be curly. His small, cruel eyes, however, if they were babyish too, were those of a baby who would delight in sticking pins into the flesh of a kitten, or pulling the wings off a live bird. Jim wondered if this could be Cy Denton. Somehow the man reminded him of someone. He couldn't think who.

Although keeping his eyes upon this man, Jim watched to see if Gooch would appear.

The leader, a six-gun levelled in his hand, stepped forward and removed Jim's gun.

" Who are you, an' what the hell do you mean whistlin' around a camp in the dark ? " the man demanded.

" My name is Jim Dysart, an' if you'll let me lower my arms now I'll tell you what my business is."

The eyelids of the leader became a trifle more slitted. " You can let 'em down," he said. " Set over there on that pack-saddle." He glanced around the group, then snapped angrily. " Where's Slim ? "

" He was right close to me," a man volunteered. " I thought he was right behind till I got back to the fire."

" Quick ! See if all the night horses—Never mind, he's gone."

They could all hear the rapidly fading clippity-clop of a galloping horse.

" Look, Cy, didn't you know that Slim was——"

" Shut up," Cy Denton roared, and then Jim knew that the outlaw they called " Slim " was his brother Gooch. Gooch had recognized him, and rather than face him had grabbed off one of the outlaws' night horses in the dark and galloped away.

" So you're Cy Denton," Jim said as he seated himself on the packsaddle. " It's quite an honour to meet the most famous horsethief in the Northwest."

" Maybe you won't be so sure it's an honour, brother, after I git through with you," Denton replied. " What do you want ? "

" My cattle. You see the present state of my finances are such that I can't afford to lose as big a bunch as the one you've got out here—to say nothing of the ones you've already got away with."

" Cool customer to say the least," a bald-headed outlaw remarked.

" You think that we'd be fools enough to give up a bunch of that size after we've got 'em this far, if they had been stolen ? " Denton demanded.

" I think you would rather than fight off a couple of posses," Jim said calmly.

" Mister, if you had a posse with you you wouldn't have come in here alone," Denton said.

"True. I'm absolutely alone. On the other hand I wasn't fool enough to have followed you all this distance by myself."

"Just what do you mean ?"

"You'll get it short and sweet, Denton. I had two men with me, with a good-sized posse coming behind. One man has gone back to get that posse. The other has gone on to Red Rock to notify the sheriff of this county. You can kill me if you want to, but you'll have a hell of a time gettin' away with these cows with a posse on each side of you."

Some of the outlaws swore wrathfully. Denton's face was stained an angry red. Jim had never been in a more dangerous spot than he was now, and he knew it.

"Mr. Dysart, I don't like your brass," Denton said. "I don't like the idea of any man thinkin' he can ride into my camp an' scare me."

"I'm not tryin' to scare you, Denton ; I'm just givin' you a chance to be sensible. It happens I'm not interested in arrestin' you at the moment. I just want my cattle back. I'll be frank. I don't expect a posse for another twenty-four hours from either direction. That's long enough for you boys to get plumb away, but not long enough to hide the cattle."

"You know, I suppose, that your brother is one of my men ?" Denton taunted.

"That's why I'm not anxious to have you arrested."

"Mister man, hell nor high water couldn't make me give these cattle up. Twenty-four hours is twice as long as we'll need to put 'em where no posse'll ever find 'em. The only question in my mind is what to do with you."

Jim felt his hopes sinking. He had gambled and lost. He didn't like that cruel look in Cy Denton's eyes.

"Ordinarily, we'd bump off brash guys like you," Denton said, "but on account o' you bein' sort of related to us in a way we'll go easy on you. Start packin' up, boys, an' git yore horses. We're movin'."

Denton walked over to Jim's horse and slashed off a long whang-leather saddle-string. He tossed the string to one of his men.

"Tie his hands," he ordered curtly. "Behind him."

Resistance was sheer folly. Jim placed his hands behind his back, and the rustler tied them so tightly that the thong bit deep into his flesh.

They helped him to mount then, and as an added precaution his feet were tied to the stirrups.

The fire had been extinguished right after Jim's arrival. He remained motionless on his horse with Denton close beside him, while the other seven outlaws rounded up the cattle. Finally they were joined by two other men. While one of these stood guard Denton rode out to give orders.

Then, even though it was already dark, Jim was blindfolded. He felt his horse being led away. He knew he was behind the

driven herd of cattle, and was reminded painfully more than once that he was in the timber as branches which he couldn't see kept slashing him across the face.

Then, after what seemed endless hours, he discovered that he could no longer hear the cattle, but his horse was still being led. He asked no questions. Then, after what seemed hours more, his horse stopped. The ropes were removed from his feet and he was ordered to get down.

Two men caught his arms and propelled him backward. They gave a sudden push, and he felt himself falling through space. He opened his mouth and gave an involuntary yell, and then he landed with a terrific impact on hard rock.

For a minute or so he lay half dazed from the fall ; afraid to move lest he should discover that he had some broken bones. The worst pain seemed to be in his back. Then he was roused by the laughter of the men who had pushed him.

" That'll be a good place for you to cool off, Dysart," came Cy Denton's voice. " Nex' time don't be so damn' brave about bustin' into an outlaw camp. I'll ride by next year to see if yore bones are still in that prospect hole."

Jim lay there, numbed now more by horror than by pain. He was well aware that there were countless prospect holes all over the country, some of them deep. Even if no bones had been broken he knew that he had fallen a considerable distance, and what chance would he have to get out with his hands tied behind his back ?

It was hard to believe that any man could be so callous as to leave another human being to starve to death in a place like this, yet Cy Denton was famed as much for his cruelty as his craftiness.

Panic suddenly gripping him Jim sprang to his feet. The pain in his back made him groan, but he circled the walls of the pit madly. They were smooth and straight. He had no chance to climb them.

" Pee-wee ! " he screamed, and the sound of his own voice broke his panic.

There wasn't a chance in a million that Pee-wee had been near enough to that outlaw camp to see what had happened. The old puncher would hardly have been able to follow all this way undetected, and finally, had Pee-wee seen him being led off that way the old man would have come in shooting and got himself killed. No, he couldn't look for any help from Pee-wee.

He recalled having bounced off the side of the hole as he fell, and that had perhaps broken the fall enough to keep him from being killed when he struck the bottom.

" All right, Denton," he murmured aloud, " It was a good trick, but if I ever do get out of here take care of yourself."

He stumbled over a small boulder and realized that falling across that had hurt his back.

He was still blindfolded, and the first thing was to try to rub

the handkerchief off on the side of the hole. He found a jagged rock even with his shoulders and presently got the blind up over the top of his head, but all he could see was a few dim stars high up in the sky. Otherwise, he was surrounded by blackness.

He felt better, however, and with his back to the wall began to feel about for a sharp rock edge which he might use as a file or a saw to sever the saddle-string that confined his wrists. He was in a tight place, and he knew it, but he wasn't going to give up without a struggle.

None of the projecting rocks satisfied him. He would try each one, but getting little result would hunt for another. Although it was a cold night the sweat poured from him in streams. Then he made the startling discovery that it was dawn. The little patch of stars were gone, but he could see the walls of the prospect hole.

It was, he guessed, not more than fifteen feet to the top, but the hole was bell-shaped, wider at the bottom than it was at the top. There was a foot or two of soil at the top, then a rubble of loose lying glacial rock on top of limestone through which the long ago prospector had delved laboriously, hoping for the fissure which might contain gold, until the hole, getting too deep for his self-operated windlass, had obliged him to give the thing up.

Jim rested. As he sat there he thought of many things : of Pauline, of Polly, and of his mother. He thought of Ted, whose recently warm, boyish flesh was already beginning to crumble in its coffin. He thought of Gooch. Gooch who had fled like a rabbit rather than face his brother's righteous indignation.

A peculiar smile came over his face. It would be a joke on Gooch if Cy Denton's saturnine sense of humour caused him to tell Gooch what he had done to Jim. Gooch would then have to choose between leaving his own brother to die, or coming back and having to face Jim with his guilt in his hands.

It was a vagrant idea, and not at all plausible. If by any chance, however, the decision was Gooch's to make there could be no doubt what he would do. He wasn't a murderer. At any rate, improbable as it was, it was about the only hope Jim had to cling to.

He arose and set to work in earnest to free his hands. He had little hope that he could climb out of the hole unaided, but certainly he couldn't do it with his hands tied. He finally found a reasonably sharp corner of rock, and though the thongs kept slipping off so that the rock cut and scratched his flesh he sawed away resolutely.

Thirst assailed him, and his back hurt. The sharp stone was so low that he had to crouch in order to reach it and that made his back hurt worse. He could see sunlight playing on the top of the prospect hole, and he wondered if he would ever again

see the sun itself. Then, quite suddenly, the whang leather gave way, and his hands were free.

He was nearer to getting out of the hold than before. The shaft was too wide for him to stretch across it and wriggle his way upward, and he had no tool to cut foot or hand holes in the solid lime rock. The surface was far too smooth for him to climb without such aid.

Not panic now, but despair overcame him. Unless completely unlooked for assistance reached him he was doomed to remain here until he perished from thirst or starvation. He continued to make sporadic efforts to climb out, but always fell back before he could get more than a foot or so from the bottom.

Once more darkness descended, and this time there were no stars visible. It was cloudy, and he could hear the rumble of distant thunder. He knew full well the violence of these high mountain thunder-storms. If his hole happened to be in the path of even a tiny wash it might easily fill with water, or at least with enough water to drown him.

Even that, he thought, would be better than starving to death like a rat in a trap. Any kind of a quick death was preferable to a lingering one.

CHAPTER XV

Treachery and Murder

Dave Lant was not surprised when he rejoined Tex Devore to find that one of the two punchers who had been with him when he first ran across Tex had gone. He was more surprised that the other had stayed.

"Where's Marr Bradley?" he asked.

"He said he hadn't lost no rustlers, an' wouldn't go out an' git himself shot until Pig Bratton himself told him to," replied the other, a bulbous-nosed, watery-eyed fellow with wheat-coloured hair known as Dutch Rezner.

"Don't seem to me you have the control over yore crew here you used to have over the boys at the DX," Tex said mildly.

"You shoot off yore bazoo an' *I* won't go," the hostile Dutch said hoarsely.

"Which would suit me pretty good," Tex said.

Nothing more was said about turning back.

"You think there'll be enough of us to do any good?" Lant queried.

"Couldn't say. There'll be you an' me, an' Jeff Teeters an' Harve Coltrin from the DX. We ought to pick up Jim an' Pee-wee, an' Jeff an' Harve went by the Barnes' place to pick up Bill Barnes an' his boy Willie. If we can't handle 'em may

be we can hold 'em till Gene Pattee sends out a real posse from Star," Tex said.

The party rode fast, but in silence. Dave Lant was glad to have it so. He needed to think. He had lived in hell ever since the day when he had asked Libby Dysart to sign a note with him. He had wished a thousand times that he had not used the proceeds of those stolen cattle, even though it would have meant the end of his ambition to give Pauline an education, and would have brought open disgrace.

His forced subserviency to Pig Bratton had irked him as only as independent, self-reliant man can be irked. He had never really wanted Pauline to marry the man, and for a time he had been hopeful that he might find something compromising that would give him the whip hand over Bratton.

Only once had he come close. One of the men who stood in Bratton's way had been Amos Kittel. Merely a small obstacle, apparently, but that didn't stop Bratton from trying to remove him. Lant knew that the four calves which Kittel had asked Jim Dysart to help brand had been taken from a Bratton pasture by Pig himself and driven into Kittel's field. It had been done as a deliberate trap, yet it didn't fall within the criminal code. And watch as he might Dave had never discovered anything illegal in his employer's actions.

He was glad now, however, that the thing was out in the open between himself and Pauline. For years he had dreaded that the girl would find it out, and now he was amazed to know how relieved he felt about it. He might have forfeited some of the girl's respect, but certainly none of her affection.

If only there was some way to prevent her from having to marry Pig Bratton. The one way he had long thought of was suicide, but he had known, somehow, that that would be worse for Pauline than what he would save her from. And unless he made public the reason for his act before he died Bratton might use her desire to protect his memory to gain his ends.

But now she knew, and if something did happen to him she would be free from Pig Bratton for ever. She would know that that was what he wanted. Tex Devore would be in command of the posse until they encountered Jim Dysart, and that was the way he wanted it. He wanted to be entirely free to act on his own initiative.

They came upon the other party at the designated place, but the day was almost gone. It was soon necessary to make camp. Tex and Dave drew away by themselves to discuss strategy.

"Wish I knew what had happened to Jim," Tex said. "If he runs on to Pee-wee we'll be all right. If he don't we may not see him at all, an' we'll need him."

"If the rustlers crossed into Montana, as Pee-wee said they did, Jim may go on to Red Rock to raise a posse there," Dave thought.

"Not Jim. He might send Pee-wee, but he'll stick close

himself. Dave, I'm worried about that man of yours who wouldn't come."

"You mean Bradley? Aw, he just went back to report to Bratton."

"Maybe. An' maybe he took a short-cut to warn Cy Denton about us."

"You think he might be one of Denton's men?" Lant queried with surprise. "No, that ain't possible—not unless Pig Bratton himself is one of Denton's gang."

"Could be," Tex drawled, and again Lant gave a start. "No, don't let yore imagination run away with yuh, Tex Bratton may be hard an' all that, but he's got too much at stake to monkey with outlaws."

"Yeah, I know," Tex said softly, thinking of Pauline Lant whom Pig was going to marry. "I may be wrong, but we've got to be damn careful we don't run into an ambush."

"Tell yuh what, Tex; in the morning I'll take my boy an' scout ahead. If Denton's got anybody layin' for us I'll find it out."

"Well, you were a purty good scout against the Spaniards back in '98 when we were Rough Riders with Teddy Roosevelt. I guess you can take care of yourself," Tex said.

In the morning, after a hasty, before-dawn breakfast, Dave Lant and Dutch Rezner rode away ahead of the rest. They didn't need to follow the trail the rustlers had used since they were heading for a known destination. They were on a grim hunt, and they didn't rush like a pair of schoolboys going to a ball game.

Rezner talked incessantly, and Dave Lant wanted to concentrate upon his problems in silence.

"Look," Dave said at last, "our job is to watch out for an ambush. Wherever it's possible we want to keep at least three hundred yards apart. Don't call out to me unless you see something suspicious."

That silenced Dutch Rezner. It was as well for Dave Lant that he didn't see the hatred in the cold stare which the tough puncher directed at him from time to time.

The sun was still an hour high when they reached the divide at the place where they were to meet Pee-wee Rust. Dave stopped in the open, expecting Pee-wee to see him and announce his presence, but after five minutes of waiting he rode on; Rezner still keeping a good distance away.

He came suddenly upon the place where Pee-wee had camped, but the little puncher seemed to have drifted on. Dave sat his horse silently, trying to think what to do next, when suddenly he heard a groan. Listening intently he heard it again, and it came from just below a little grassy pitch. He yelled at Rezner and started down the pitch.

Doubled up in the chaparral lay Pee-wee Rust. Blood from a ghastly bullet wound in his body stained the grass red.

" Pee-wee, what happened ? " Dave gasped as he leaped to the ground.

" Bushwhacker got me," Pee-wee said weakly. He managed a grin. " Peggin' out purty fast, Dave."

" You hang on to yourself," Dave said, and scooped the little puncher up into his arms. He carried Pee-wee to level ground beside the small spring and pressed water to his lips. Pee-wee drank gratefully. Seemed to feel better. Dave knew, however, that the little man hadn't long to live. He had to fight back the tears. He had ridden the range for years with Pee-wee when he had been foreman of the DX. Those had been good days. No more loyal a man had ever straddled a horse than Pee-wee Rust, Dave thought miserably. This was the second death by violence in a week. Dave felt in his own mind that there was going to be more, many more, before peace came again.

Pee-wee was trying to talk. " Dave, you gotta listen," he got out. " I—ain't got—much time."

" Did you see who shot you ? " Dave asked.

" No."

" Have you seen Jim Dysart ? "

" No."

" Do you know where the rustlers went with them DX cows ? "

" They was right below here—on a meadow—las' night. I figgered they was camped for the night, but in the mornin'—they was—gone. I tried to—pick up trail. Thought they'd gone on down the meadow. Followed it ten, fifteen miles, then thought I'd better come back—meet you fellows."

" Take it easy, Pee-wee," Dave urged.

" Comin' back I saw where I'd missed the trail. Rustlers doubled back—drove cattle along main ridge. You'll—find trail—mile from here."

" Then what ? " Dave queried eagerly, desperately afraid the little puncher might pass over his last divide at any moment.

" Then—somebody—plugged me." They were Pee-wee's last words.

Dave looked up at Dutch Rezner's expressionless face. " This is the most cowardly murder I ever saw," he said bitterly. " Something has happened to Jim Dysart, too."

" Well, what're you goin' to do about it ? " Dutch asked.

" There's still a lot of daylight, an' I'm pickin' up them rustlers trail where Pee-wee said I'd find it. You stay here an' when Tex an' the boys git here tell 'em which way I've gone."

" Right," Rezner said.

It was a minute or more before Dave could bring himself to ride away. For the first time there was a hint of suspicion in his eyes. Then he shrugged it off and rode away.

No sooner was Dave out of sight than Dutch Rezner picked

up the body of Pee-wee Rust and carrying it down the slope hurled it as far into the chaparral as he could. Then he returned and kicked leaves around to cover up the blood. When Tex and his party arrived Dutch was sitting his horse in plain view a couple of hundred yards from where Pee-wee had died.

By that time it was nearly sundown.

" Where's Dave ? " Tex demanded.

" He went on with Pee-wee," Rezner lied brazenly. " Pee-wee said the rustlers had gone straight on down this meadow yuh see down yonder. Dave wanted to try to pick up the trail at the lower end of the meadow before it got dark, an' he told me to wait here an' tell you boys to follow him."

" Then what're we waitin' for ? " Tex said. " Come on."

The meadow was a good fifteen miles long, and it was dark before the posse was half way to its lower end. But even in the darkness it was easy to travel over the soft grass. They kept on going, expecting at any moment to be hailed by Dave Lant. Then the meadow ended against a tangled thicket of willows and alder. The posse had to halt.

" They sure as hell didn't go any further this way," Ted said. " You sure they said for us to follow this meadow till they hailed us ? "

" That's what Lant said," Dutch Rezner replied sullenly.

" Well, all we can do is to camp here an' wait till Dave comes back," Tex said. " The horses are tired, an' we can all do with some sleep."

But in spite of what he had said Tex Devore didn't sleep. He had rolled his blankets some twenty feet from where Dutch Rezner lay. He noticed that up until midnight no sound other than measured breathing came from Dutch, while all the other men snored from sheer weariness. Tex himself began to emit irregular snores, but he was not asleep.

Then, presently, he made out a dark shape creeping away from Rezner's blankets. It was pretty dark, but he could make out that the man was crawling on all fours. Tex rolled out, and followed the man stealthily until he saw Rezner rise to his feet near the picketed horses. Dutch Rezner was just inserting his toe into the stirrup when a voice spoke from six feet away.

" Where do you think you're goin', Dutch ? " Tex queried softly.

Rezner's body rose into the air and he grabbed for his gun before his seat struck the saddle. The gun glinted faintly as it cleared the holster, then Tex Devore fired. Dutch pitched to the ground on the other side of the horse. He was dead by the time the excited possemen reached the scene.

Dave Lant picked up the trail of the stolen cattle where Pee-wee Rust had said he would. He did not, however, see a man who shinned down from a scraggly, bushy-limbed pine tree on

a ridge-top half way between where he had found Pee-wee and where he struck the cattle spoor. The man ran to where his horse was concealed and kept to the brush until he was well ahead of Lant, and several pinnacles on the divide intervened.

Dave knew the range perhaps better than any man in Lehi Valley, and he was puzzled as to why the cattle should be driven this way. He knew that not ten miles ahead was an impasse where cattle could not be driven. If they turned back on the Montana side they would only have lost time.

The only other alternative was to drive the cattle back down one of the almost impassible deep canyons into Lehi Valley; back on to the Big Hat range, within twenty miles of the old Partee ranch where he lived.

Something seemed to be spreading out in Lant's brain. What had been puzzling fragments for a long time were suddenly beginning to take specific form like a jig-saw puzzle falling into place. He wasn't sure of anything yet, but he was on the track. He wanted to know.

He still had some daylight, and although his horse was tired he urged the animal along at a swift trot or a lope. It was all important to know whether those cows had turned to the right or the left when they reached the great break in the divide which would stop them from going straight ahead.

As it began to grow dusk he had to concentrate more intently upon the tracks. A little more, he decided, and he would ride back to meet Tex and the posse, which should be close behind him. Then suddenly, the tracks ended.

They hadn't turned to the Montana side, he knew. The other slope was a barren sidehill covered with a shale rock where nothing could leave a track. He turned that way, and rode out on a projecting shoulder. Below him yawned a deep, impenetrable canyon, properly on the Big Hat range, but so inaccessible that it had never been used. He saw indisputable sign that the cattle had been driven down there.

There was no use to go any further without help. He swung his horse around, and something struck him in the breast with the force of a sledge hammer. He heard the sound, and it was just dark enough for him to see the flash of the rifle. He knew that he had been shot, but somehow he didn't care. A surge of almost savage joy shot through him. He spurred his horse, and reached for his six-gun.

Twice more he saw the rifle flash as he charged. Both times he heard the bullet whine past his head. He raised his six-gun and fired at the gun flash. Then came a third flash, and he heard the impact of lead meeting bone. They had got his horse that time and he was flying through space.

Desperately Dave Lant tried to raise his six-gun. The concealed rifleman fired once more, and Dave's six-gun clattered on the rocks. An instant later his head struck the rock, too. Dave Lant was dead.

CHAPTER XVI

Gooch Rides Alone

The thunder sounds drew nearer, and suddenly the rain came. Jim could see his patch of sky light up as the lightning played tag among the clouds. The first drops of rain pattered lightly upon the rocky bottom of the prospect hole, then splattered more loudly as the water spread over the hole and slowly started to rise.

He knew that storm would likely mean a cloudburst somewhere and its violence seemed to be centred right where he was. He could easily feel the vibration of the earth at each tremendous thunderclap. He crouched against the side of the wall and waited for the moment when the water would gather into streams and begin to flow as well as to fall into his death-trap.

He felt there was a remote chance that he might be able to tread water long enough to reach the top if the pit should fill up, but that was a long and remote chance.

Minutes passed and then, suddenly, he heard a plopping sound as a rivulet of water debouched over the rim of the prospect hole and fell for fifteen feet. It was only a tiny cascade at first, but he could feel the water rising up around his boots inch by inch. Only by intermittent lightning flashes could he see the stream of yellowish water where the cataract began, but with each flash the stream was noticeably larger. Presently it was gripping his legs above the knees.

If it kept on this way for another half hour, he thought, he would have the answer. Either he would crawl out of the top like a half drowned rat, or he would be drowned. But there was only an occasional flash of lightning now; the thunder was dying away in low, sullen rumbles. He put out his hand, and the water struck it with much less violence.

Despair clutched him again. He had been keyed up for a decision one way or the other, and now what he faced was another miserable long period of waiting under circumstances which could scarcely have been more unbearable.

He was standing in water up to his waist, and it was cold. Already his teeth chattered, and it would be a long while before the water could seep away through that solid limestone, or evaporate.

"I came out to catch rustlers, and I'll probably catch pneumonia," he muttered grimly.

He couldn't sit down now. He had to stand up and take it. Presently he saw a star appear, and soon there was a tiny cluster of them. They dispelled a tiny bit of his loneliness.

Daybreak came at last. He tried to move around in the

narrow confines of his prison, but his legs were cramped and almost incapable of motion. He wondered if after all he was doomed to drown.

Then, abruptly, he heard a human voice! For a moment he hardly dared to breathe. He was sure it had been an hallucination.

But it came again. Distant, to be sure, but undeniable human. And it had been a shout.

Could he make himself heard? To die here when help was so near would be worse than anything. He put both hands to his mouth and yelled with all the power of his lungs. The sound echoed and re-echoed in his little prison, but he wondered how far it would reach outside.

He continued to yell at intervals, then pause to listen for a reply. Then, in answer to about his tenth yell, he heard a reply. To his amazement it was his own name being called.

"Jim!" the voice came to him faintly. "Jim, where are you?"

"Here," he yelled frantically. "Don't miss it." Then he put his hands to his mouth again and simply yelled.

The next he heard was the sound of a horse's feet clopping over the rocky ground.

"I'm here," he called. "In a hole."

He heard the horse stop, then footsteps came to the edge of the prospect hole. A man looked down. It was Gooch!

"Jim, for God's sake are you all right?" Gooch cried anxiously.

"Spiritually—but I'm sure as hell wet," Jim croaked grimly.

"I'll drop a rope." Gooch said. When next he appeared he was on his horse again. He dropped the loop end of his lasso and Jim slipped it under his arms and seized it with both hands.

"Take your dallies and pull slow an' I'll walk up," Jim said.

In a minute, with but little discomfort, he was safely on top. But when he tried to walk his legs felt like stilts. He sat down heavily and began to wring water out of his overalls.

"Lord, I was afraid I wouldn't find you," Gooch said.

"Yeah? How come you knew I was in a hole?"

"Yo're lucky you didn't git shot—walkin' into a rustler camp like you did."

"I noticed you didn't lose any time gittin' away."

"Damn little I coulda done for you if I hadn't."

"Your boss has got quite a sense of humour—or was throwin' me in here just his way of playin' safe?"

Gooch studiedly avoided his brother's gaze. "I suppose it wouldn't do any good for me to say that I didn't have anything to do with stealin' that bunch of cattle."

For answer Jim tossed the sheep-shank bandana holder over to his brother. "I found that at your night camp on the other side of the mountain."

Gooch tossed the trinket around in his hand. "Wondered

where I lost that," he said. "Dammit! You've got to listen, whether you believe me or not. If you don't believe me you've got to believe that I'm a damn sight worse than even you think I am. You'll think I had a hand in Dave Lant's murder, too."

"Dave Lant! Murdered?" Jim left off wringing his pants' legs. He felt a choking sensation in his throat. He had quarrelled with Dave Lant. Fought with him. And yet in his heart he felt an affection for Dave that was almost like that of son for father. His thought sped to Pauline. She had worshipped her father.

"How did it happen?" he asked quietly.

"He was dry-gulched by a rustler named Hauser. He was the same feller killed Pee-wee."

"My God," Jim breathed in agony. "Pee-wee, too?"

"You've got to think I'm pretty low if you believe I'd have a hand in those murders," Gooch said thickly.

"No, I couldn't believe that," Jim said. "Go ahead, Gooch; I'll listen.

"Nobody needs to tell me I'm no good," Gooch said bitterly. "I not only wasted more than my share of the estate, but I got Ted to waste his, an' I suppose I'm responsible for him bein' killed."

"Just stick to what happened," Jim said. "I know the rest."

"I found out too late that Pig Bratton had rigged me an' Ted from the start. I was in debt. I had to get even some way. I've known Cy Denton for over a year now. Never mind how I met him. I talked to him about rustlin' Bratton's cows, an' he liked the idea. I figgered my knowledge of the range would make it easy, especially if I could get Ted to go in with us after he got a job there. Ted wouldn't touch it."

"I know."

"Things went to hell all of a sudden. Bratton somehow got wise to the first drive the gang tried to make, and Ted was killed. I knew I'd been seen. That was why I didn't go to the funeral, but I knew Mom would be in a bad way so I went to see her. The gang didn't show up where I was to meet 'em. I started over here, and cut their trail. I wasn't sure what was up, nor who I was following, so I tried to read sign at their camp. That must have been where you found this trinket."

"It was. Go on."

"That's about all. I didn't know it was our—your cattle till I joined 'em. I made a protest, an' Denton only laughed. He said a cow was a cow to him regardless of whose brand it carried. Then you dropped in."

"An' you dropped out," Jim said faintly. "At least I feel better now. But how did you know where to find me?"

"I trailed Denton. I knew he was afraid to go on, so he doubled back to try to hide the herd. I had no idea what they'd done to you, so I had to crawl almost into their camp

last night an' listen. Denton likes to talk. He was still laughin' about the trick he'd played on you. He said when the posses turned back he'd go back an' if you were still alive he'd pull you out an' let you go. It was then I heard Hauser tell how he had shot Pee-wee an' Dave."

"Well, we got no time to be sitting here," Jim declared. "You haven't got an extra horse by any chance—or some grub ?"

"I got both. I raided one of Denton's caches for grub, an' I roped a spare horse on the range. But one of us will have to ride bareback." He walked to his horse and came back with cold food and a canteen of water.

Jim ate wolfishly.

"What about it, Gooch," Jim asked at last, "are you with me from now on, or do you want to pull out ? Don't answer in a hurry. You won't find yourself popular with our old friends. If you go back to Lehi Valley Pig Bratton may get you arrested as a rustler. He just about runs that country, you know."

"Ted is dead, an' Pee-wee an' Dave. I reckon I'm partly responsible for all of 'em," Gooch said. "The only thing I could pride myself on lately is that I wasn't a coward. So I'm goin' back with you. I'll have some interestin' things to tell you later."

"Good !" Jim said warmly. "That makes up for a lot of things. But it don't mean you have to stick yore neck out an' let Pig Bratton send you over the road. You may have to lay low for a while, until—well, until things work out. You didn't happen to see anything that might lead you to suspect that Pig Bratton and Cy Denton are friends, did you ?"

Gooch betrayed his amazement. "Why no," he said. "Denton claimed he'd like nothin' better than to swipe most of Pig's cows. No, if you figger that way, Jim, I think you're barkin' up the wrong tree."

"Well, maybe I am. But come on, we've got work to do."

"But say, Jim," Gooch exclaimed, "you may have somethin' after all. Pig may not be in cahoots with Denton—I don't think he can be—but some of his men are. Marr Bradley was at Denton's camp last night."

"Bradley, hunh ? Wasn't he one o' the men with Bratton an' Dave when they jumped Denton's gang just before Ted was killed ?"

"He sure was. I got a squint at him when I was shootin' back at 'em."

The sun had only cleared the distant eastern horizon when the brothers rode warily into the ridge where Dave Lant had been killed. It was highly probable the outlaws would have scouts out, and if they had ambushed one man they might try to kill another. Bushwhackers, however, were seldom bold enough to attack two men.

They were not long finding the body where it lay on the rocky sidehill. The saddle had not been removed from the dead horse. Jim couldn't bear to look long at the man who had once been his friend. Dave looked old, and yet his dead features were set in a smile.

"This will be tough on Pauline," Gooch ventured. "Down yonder in that canyon is where our cattle are, unless they've shoved 'em right down on to the Big Hat range."

"Too bad we can't pay 'em a visit," Jim said grimly.

They got the saddle from under the dead horse and put it on the animal Gooch had ridden bareback. They got the body of the murdered foreman across the saddle, and with Gooch riding behind they rode back along the divide, arriving at the place where Pee-wee had been killed at almost the same time Tex Devore and the others came up from the Montana side.

The posse didn't see the body of Dave Lant at first, and shouted exuberant greetings to Jim, demanding to know where he had been. Gooch they ignored.

Jim held up his hand. "Bad news, fellows," he said. "We've got the body of a dead man here, an' there must be another close around. Dave Lant an' Pee-wee have been murdered."

Complete silence greeted his remark. Led by Tex the others dismounted and silently viewed the body of Dave Lant.

"At least we got the varmint who throwed us off the trail," Jeff Teeters said, and told of the way Dutch Rezner had misled them, and what had happened to him. "We buried that skunk where he fell," Jeff finished.

The body of Pee-wee was found at last, and when Jim told of Gooch having seen Marr Bradley at the outlaw camp they were able to draw deductions.

"I was afraid of both him an' Rezner all along," Tex said, "but Dave seemed to think they were all right. It's plain now that Bradley took a short-cut to tell 'em we were comin'."

"I'm afraid I messed up things, too," Jim said. "If I hadn't thought I might bluff 'em they might have stayed on that meadow."

"Not after Bradley reached 'em," Tex said. "Don't blame yourself. They out-smarted us. The question is what to do now."

"They're in Wood Canyon, or the cattle are," Jim said. "If Gene Partee's posse was at the other end of that instead of coming behind us we'd have 'em."

"There's one of two things to do," Tex said. "Attack now, or wait till we can send men back. Partee should be along this afternoon. We can send somebody back to meet them, an' the rest of us watch the upper end of this canyon."

"There's mighty small chance they'll be there by the time our men can get back to the mouth of the canyon, to-morrow night at the earliest," Jim said. "They're my cattle, an' it's

my fight. To get into the upper end of Wood Canyon we'll have to cross a bare hillside over a mile wide where anybody in the trees below can pick us off like kids shootin' balloons with a sling-shot. I don't want to ask anybody to risk their lives that way."

"I'm glad you look at it that way," Tex said, relieved. "I'm as anxious to git hold of 'em as anybody, but it would be a hopeless fight from this end. But a posse from below could drive 'em out this way, an' then we can pick 'em off as easy as they could us crossin' that hillside."

"But if we wait," Gooch said curtly, "they'll be gone. Denton ain't fool enough to stay in that canyon an' let himself be trapped."

"I can't see any way out of it," Tex said curtly.

It bothered Jim to see that nobody wanted anything to do with Gooch. They ignored him when he spoke, and Gooch himself quickly turned sulky. He might be Jim's brother, and he had saved Jim's life, but he had not done it heroically, and they thought he was a rustler. And Gooch knew that they thought so.

They eventually decided to send Harvey Coltrin and Willie Barnes back with the bodies. The rest of them, Tex, Jim, Gooch, Jeff and old man Barnes moved back along the divide to where Dave Lant had been killed. It was considerably past noon when they arrived.

Jim, far from recovered from his recent ordeal, streched out on a blanket in the shade to rest while the others kept watch.

Gooch prowled restlessly up and down by himself. No one offered to speak to him. Finally he came over to where they sat, a considerable distance from where Jim slept.

"Look," he said angrily, "them outlaws ain't just settin' down there in Wood Canyon waitin' for us to round 'em up. They've got another better hidin' place than that, an' we're just losin' time."

"What would you suggest?" Tex asked coldly.

"Goin' after 'em right now. We may be able to overhaul 'em before they get to a place where an' army couldn't drive 'em out. Besides, we can round up Jim's cows before they git scattered."

"I think we'll stick to the original plan," Tex stated.

"You can if you want to, but I'm damned if I'll stick here." Gooch said hotly. "I'm takin' their trail. If I git into the timber down there without gittin' shot at you'll know damn' well then they ain't there so you can wake Jim up and follow me."

The others said nothing. Gooch looked at them a moment, then got his horse and started down the slope where Dave Lant had been killed.

"He may be all right," Tex said, "an' he may not. I wouldn't say he wanted to entice us into any ambush, but it

ain't too far-fetched to think he may want to join up with Denton again now that he knows Jim is safe."

In spite of that Tex and the others moved out to where they could watch his progress. In places the slope was so steep that slides of talu had collected, and frequently Gooch's horse slid for yards at a time on its hindquarters. They could see the rider's body thrown far back in the saddle to give his pony balance.

As the converging ridges narrowed in to a single gully it was obvious that anyone below who desired to do so could shoot Gooch off his horse without difficulty, but nothing happened. He reached the first group of trees and disappeared.

" Where's Gooch ? " Jim inquired as soon as he awoke and joined the others. They told him.

" I suppose I know how you feel," he said, ' but Gooch is my brother an' I trust him. The fact that he wasn't shot at, and that he didn't come back don't prove to me that he joined Denton. I've had a little sample of what Denton does to people he don't like, and I don't like the idea of Gooch gettin' the same medicine. I'm goin' down there, an' I'm askin' no man to follow me."

" Good Lord, I never thought about him takin' it like that," Jeff Teeters said. " He acts like he thought we wanted to get Gooch killed."

" An' I never thought about what might happen to Gooch if he should be on the level," Tex said. " I figgered they'd shoot him in the open if they were there unless they knew he wanted to join 'em. Maybe I was wrong."

They raced for their horses, but before they got started Jim Dysart was half-way down.

CHAPTER XVII

" They May Hang Him "

Pig Bratton was back at the ranch the evening of Dave Lant's departure. Pauline didn't try to avoid him when he entered the house. " Where's your father ? " he asked bluntly.

" He joined a posse to go after rustlers who are driving away some DX cattle," she replied.

" That's what I thought," he said angrily. " Old man Partee was trying to get a mob to go out from Star."

" Why didn't you join it ? " she asked.

He turned upon her in fury. " Because I don't believe a damned word of it," he snarled. " The whole Dysart clan are in with the Denton gang. Ten chances to one while they're luring all the able-bodied men out of the country the Dentons are making a raid on *my* cattle. Your dad is supposed to be working for me, and when he comes back I'll tell him so."

" I think he knows it," she said.

" And another thing: I don't want you to call me 'Pig' any more. My name is Homer."

" Why, I thought you didn't mind."

" I don't like the way *you* say it," he snapped. " Homer is a hell of a name, and I'd sooner be called Pig by the men. But not by you."

" I really think 'Pig' suits you better," she said evenly.

" You do, eh? Well, I don't like the way you and your dad have been treating me lately. You especially. There are other women, you know, but it just happens I can bring you to time any time I want to," he threatened.

" Through exposing the fact that my father once accepted money for stolen cattle to pay a debt of honour."

His pale eyes betrayed his astonishment. " You know that? Dave Lant told you?"

" He confided in me, yes."

" All right, I'm glad you do know. Now we'll put our cards on the table. If you don't marry me, and within the next week, you're going to see your old man behind bars. What's your answer?"

She turned away, sickened by the greedy lust in his eyes, and by a sense of her own helplessness. He caught her by the shoulder and whirled her around.

" No stalling," he gritted. " I want an answer now. Yes or no."

She twisted loose from him. " You make me sick," she cried furiously. " When you have the decency to cool off, and can talk like a gentleman, I'll discuss things with you."

" Okay," he said sullenly. " I'm upset. I shouldn't have tried the rough stuff. But I'm crazy about you, and I'm hog enough not to let anything stand in the way of me getting what I want."

She trembled for half an hour after he had gone to his own room. She realized suddenly that she couldn't remain under the same roof with him with her father gone.

She didn't go down to supper, and to her vast relief he didn't insist that she come down. When she at last decided he had gone to bed she changed to her riding clothes and slipped out the back way. She was still sore in body from her fall, but anything was preferable to staying there. She didn't breathe easily, however, until she was out in the main road.

She thought briefly of riding to the DX. Jim would be gone, so she needn't worry about meeting him. She quickly decided, however, to ride into Star and spend the night with Polly Bryan.

To her relief there was still a light in Polly's room. Polly didn't seem surprised to see her. " I'm glad you came in," Polly said. " I've been lonely, and worried."

" Why, bless your sweet face, what have you to worry about?" Pauline asked with spurious gaiety.

"I'm worried about Jim. Somehow, I have the feeling that he isn't safe. Do you know where he is?"

Pauline wondered if the invalid girl was slightly psychic. "Why, isn't he at the ranch?" she asked with a quiver in her voice she couldn't control. "I don't go there very often, you know."

"Why don't you go there?" Polly continued her assault. "You don't need to fall out with folks just because your father and Jim had a little spat. I know Jim is sorry about that. He's just too stubborn to admit a mistake, like all men."

"Oh, I haven't fallen out with them, but you see I'm going to marry Homer Bratton, and he doesn't want me to go there."

"You—are going to marry—Pig Bratton? No, you can't. It isn't right. You're in love with Jim, and he with you."

"Polly! Don't say such things," Pauline protested, painfully conscious of the redness of her cheeks. "That isn't true. Jim is in love with you, and always has been."

Polly ignored that. "Things will work out all right," she said calmly. "Unless you foolishly marry that man. You know you don't love him."

Pauline could stand no more. "Oh, Polly," she cried, and buried her face in the other girl's shoulder.

The next morning, partly at Polly's urgent suggestion, and partly because she wanted to, Pauline rode out to the DX. Jim wouldn't be there, and she could see his mother without danger of an emotional upset.

She found Stella Baxter in charge, aided only by Maudie Johnson, the fifteen-year-old girl who worked there days and went home nights.

"My, I'm glad to see you," Stella said. "Maudie's mother promised to come and help, but she ain't showed up. I left everything in a mess, and that man of mine is worse than lost when he gets into the store and the post office. You can stay all night, can't you? I'll come back to-morrow if Mrs. Johnson don't show up."

Pauline hadn't looked for that, but she had no excuse. At least she wouldn't have to go back and impose on Polly, or dodge Pig Bratton at the ranch.

"Yes, I'll stay as long as I'm needed," she said quietly. "How is Libby?"

"Oh, she's all right. The shock bowled her over, but she's improvin' faster than I thought. Your big job will be to keep her in bed."

Pauline went in to greet the sick woman. She felt ashamed when Mrs. Dysart shed tears for the sheer pleasure of seeing her.

"You know you've always been like my own daughter," Mrs. Dysart said. "I've felt so badly because I've seen so little of you since you came home. But I know a lot of it was Jim's fault."

"No, it wasn't," Pauline denied quickly. "It wasn't Jim's

fault at all. But I'm here now, and I'm going to stay until you get better."

"I'm so glad," Mrs. Dysart sighed.

Mrs. Johnson, mother of Maudie, the hired girl, sent word by Maudie that she had a misery and would not be able to help out. The next day Stella Baxter rode over, but Pauline knew how busy the buxom, good-natured postmistress was and sent her home.

Pauline enjoyed taking care of Mrs. Dysart. She thrilled when she saw the woman's face light up every time she called her 'Mom' as she had in the old days, when to all intents and purposes she was a sister to the three Dysart boys.

But always in the back of her mind lay a great worry over her father, and Jim, and the other men who had gone out after the rustlers. She was well aware of Cy Denton's reputation for ruthless brutality. Long ago the man had said that he would fight to the death before he would be sent back to the penitentiary, and her father and others were assured that he meant what he said.

She had to hide her anxiety from Mrs. Dysart, who believed Jim and the others were out on the range injecting serum into cattle as a precaution against black-leg.

She had vowed not to see Jim again if she could help it, but now she was practically committed to staying at the DX until his return. But she did not dream of the tragedy that was building up around her.

She had given Mrs. Dysart a bath, the third morning of her stay, and was combing the woman's long beautiful brown hair when Maudie, who was late that morning, came bouncing in. The girl's eyes were agog with excitement.

"Have you heard the news?" the girl burst out loudly.

"Maudie? Quiet, please," Pauline cried warningly.

The girl paid no attention. "Have you heard?" she shrieked again. "Oh, Mrs. Dysart, I feel so sorry for you."

Pauline seized the girl's scrawny shoulder. "Get out of here," she cried, but Mrs. Dysart told her to stay, and the girl slipped from Pauline's fingers like an eel.

"What is it, Maudie? What happened?" Mrs. Dysart demanded.

"Mom, you mustn't get excited," Pauline protested, but the excited girl broke in on her.

"It's your boy Gooch. They say he is a rustler, an' my dad said they might even hang him. They say he may have been the one who killed——"

Maudie paused with two fingers over her mouth, and stared wildly at Pauline. "Oh, oh, you didn't know yore father was killed, did you?" she spluttered.

Pauline's mind was whizzing in circles, but she caught the girl's arm and threw her violently out of the room and shut the door.

"Mom, don't believe it," she implored. "That girl is a liar. You know she is. The whole Johnson family are liars. She made the whole thing up."

"She couldn't have made it all up," Mrs. Dysart spoke lowly through blue lips. "Bring her back. I want the truth."

The words, "Your father killed," ripped and tore through Pauline's mind. The haunting fear which had tormented her was realized. For Libby's sake she had to get hold of herself. She drew a long quivering breath, and went into the kitchen, but the girl was gone. A moment later, however, she saw the girl's mother, a fat, frowsy woman, hurriedly crossing the yard. The woman panted heavily and sank weakly into a chair. It was a minute or more before she could speak.

"Has—has Maudie been here?" she asked.

"She has. She rushed in with a wild story about my father being killed, and Gooch Dysart accused of the murder. But it isn't true. I know it can't be true."

"It's true all right," the woman said. "I'm sorry. I told Maudie to go home so she couldn't upset poor Mrs. Dysart till she got the news from somebody else, but she slipped away. I come as quick as I missed her."

"Tell me quietly what happened," Pauline commanded.

"I want to know, too," came Mrs. Dysart's voice from the doorway.

There was no help for it now. Pauline got her back to bed, and then Mrs. Johnson told her story.

"Some men came to our house in the night an' waked my husband. They said they was lookin' for Gooch. One of 'em was Mr. Bratton. He done the talkin'. He said one of his men had seen the rustlers an' afterward he shot an' wounded Gooch Dysart, but Gooch got away. They thought he'd try to git home, so they tried to git here ahead of him, an' they did. My husband came home just long enough to tell me they'd caught Gooch out in the road an' then he went back to join the men. But he said there was talk——"

"Where were they taking him?" Pauline interrupted.

"My husband said they might be goin' to hang him. If they didn't they'd take him to jail in Star."

"Gooch, my poor Gooch," Mrs. Dysart moaned. "He isn't an outlaw. I know he isn't."

"I know it, too, Mom," Pauline said. "Don't you worry. The Johnsons have got it all twisted. I'll go to town right now, and get things straightened out. I'll stop on the way and send Stella Baxter over. You just stay right in bed."

"What about Dave Lant?" Mrs. Dysart persisted. "Who said he had been killed?"

Pauline dreaded the answer, but she had to listen.

"All I know 'bout that," Mrs. Johnson said, "is that Mr. Bratton said the outlaws had killed Mr. Lant."

"Listen, Mrs. Johnson," Pauline said urgently, "you stay

right here with Libby until Stella Baxter comes. I've got to go to town. You keep her in bed."

"I'll try," the woman promised.

Pauline saddled her horse with hurried but fumbling fingers and rode away. As nearly as she could tell it had been over three hours since Gooch had been taken. By that time he would be dead, or safely in jail. She tried to make herself believe that Pig Bratton wouldn't dare resort to lynch law, no matter how much he hated the Dysarts, but she also knew the cruel, vindictive nature of the man.

She paused just long enough to break the news to Stella Baxter, then kept her horse at a steady gallop until she reached the Big Hat ranch. There was no one there that could give her any information. Allie, the housekeeper, told her that Marr Bradley had arrived during the night and aroused Pig. After that they and the other punchers in the bunkhouse had ridden away, and that was all she knew.

Pauline went out to get on her horse, but paused when she saw four horsemen riding in rapidly from the range. Then, to her amazement, she recognized Jim Dysart riding in the lead.

CHAPTER XVIII

The Big Hat Gives Battle

Jim had time to cool off by the time he reached the timber in the upper end of Wood Canyon. He realized that his friends were not to blame for being distrustful of Gooch. He did not, however, wait for them. This canyon was a perfect place for an ambush, but he believed Cy Denton was too smart to allow himself to be cut off from both ends.

A tenderfoot could see that cattle, while they could be driven down over the shale, could never be driven back up. If hard pressed the outlaws would surely abandon them. That, he knew, had been in Gooch's mind. He also knew it was a perfect spot for an ambush.

Without waiting for his friends he hurried on, hoping to get out of the canyon, or to overhaul Gooch before dark. The main gorge of the canyon was not over three miles in length. Below this it flared out into a labyrinth of many canyons. He soon knew that both outlaws and cattle had escaped from the trap which he and Tex had vainly hoped could be laid for them.

Gooch was somewhere ahead of him. Foolish as his brother had been in the past Jim refused to believe that he had gone on to join the rustlers. Yet Gooch might have turned into any one of a dozen canyons. It was dark, and he wisely waited for Tex and the others. They made camp for the night.

"I don't want you to think, Jim, that we meant to let

Gooch down," Tex said as they lay side by side. "We just figgered it was bad judgment for him to go, and worse for us to follow him."

"What I'm worried about is where he is now," Jim said.

"This is no Sunday School picnic we're on," Tex said. "Three dead men already on this trip. Denton didn't plan to come back on this side of the range. He had to. If he's trapped he'll fight like a wolf."

"And he wouldn't have come back here if he hadn't had friends on this side," Jim said grimly.

"You mean—Bratton?"

"Maybe. We know that Rezner and Bradly were in with Denton."

"That don't implicate Pig," Tex argued, "any more than the fact that Gooch was known to have rode with Denton implicates you."

They dropped the subject, and went to sleep.

In the morning they soon discovered that the bandits had finally abandoned the stolen cattle, after splitting them into numerous small bunches to destroy the tracks. They had lost Gooch's trail completely.

Their most direct route to Star lay past the Big Hat ranch. Thus it was they arrived there before Pauline Lant got away. At sight of her Jim loped on ahead of the others. He didn't believe she could yet have heard of her father's death, and if he had to break the news he wanted to do it alone.

One look at her face told him that she knew. He swung down beside her before either spoke.

"Pauline, I'm sorry," he said. "Your father was a good man."

"Jim, tell me one thing. He—he didn't just—get himself killed, did he?"

"No. He was coldbloodedly shot by a concealed killer while he was scouting trail. But he died like a brave man, with a gun in his hand. Pauline——"

"Jim, wait. I'm afraid I've got bad news for you, too."

"Mother?"

"No, Gooch."

"You've seen Gooch? You mean he—is dead?"

"I don't know. I can only tell you what I heard."

The others came up while she told the story she had heard from Mrs. Johnson, and what little had been added by the housekeeper at the Big Hat.

"It's easy to see what happened," Tex Devore said. "Gooch was shot at after he left us, probably by Marr Bradley. Failin' to kill him Bradley came on here an' roused Bratton an' the others an' they rode toward the DX to head Gooch off if he tried to reach home."

"I don't understand," Pauline said.

"Gooch wasn't an outlaw, Paul, but Marr Bradley is," Jim

said. "We found out, too, that Dutch Rezner was in with Denton. I think there are others here."

"You surely don't think that Pig can be in with Cy Denton," Pauline said.

"I do think so—but I can't prove it. Yet."

Pauline was suddenly remembering that Bratton's hold over her father had been possible because he knew about a herd of stolen cattle. It seemed impossible that a man of Bratton's financial standing could be connected with a known outlaw like Cy Denton, yet Pig would go a long way for money.

"Jim, what are you going to do?" she asked anxiously.

"First, find out what has happened to Gooch. Then look for Marr Bradley."

"I'll go with you," she said.

There was little conversation during the short ride to Star. The one bright bit of news for Jim was that his mother was taking it so well.

"After the way you say that brat broke the news about Gooch it's a wonder she didn't go completely to pieces," he said. "After all, Gooch was her favourite son."

The streets were full of people as they rode in. Everyone paused to gaze at them curiously. The people seemed to breathe with an air of suppressed excitement. They saw a man with a silver star on his breast, and abruptly paused to question him. He was Mike Sullivan, sheriff of Lehi county.

"Mike, do you know anything about my brother Gooch?" Jim demanded without preamble.

"He's dead, Jim," the sheriff replied with what seemed cold satisfaction. "He was killed while tryin' to git away from a posse that was bringin' him in."

"Any officers with that posse?" Jim asked.

"No, I don't believe there was, but he was a known——"

"Who led it?"

"It was Pig Bratton if yuh must know, but——"

"Where is he?"

"Look, Jim," the sheriff said. "I know yuh must be feelin' bad, but everybody knows Gooch has been goin' to the dogs fer a long time. It won't do ye any good to pick a row with Mr. Bratton."

"You leave us now, Pauline," Jim told the girl. "Better go and stay with Polly."

"No," she refused firmly. "I want to see Pig Bratton myself. Sheriff, will you find Mr. Bratton and bring him here?"

"He's up at the courthouse, miss, but I'll bring him if you say so."

"Never mind. I'll go there myself." Pauline said. She turned to Jim. "I want to see him alone. I want your promise not to say anything to him till after I see you again. Please, Jim."

" All right," he said. " I promise."

The courthouse sat on a little bench overlooking the river at the extreme south side of town. As soon as Pauline was beyond earshot Jim said grimly, " That promise didn't apply to Bradley. I want some words with that rattler."

" Go easy, Jim," Tex cautioned. " I'm with you all the way, but you may find yourself buckin' the whole Big Hat outfit."

" You keep out of it," Jim said. " You got Rezner; I want Bradley."

They started toward the Amboy, but at a word from Tex, Jeff Teeters remained with their horses just across the street. There were five horses wearing the Big Hat brand in front of the Amboy, but whether one of them belonged to Bradley they didn't know.

Jim stopped on the sidewalk. " Barnes," he said, " you go in, and if Marr Bradley is there you tell him I'm comin' in after him."

" That's a fool thing to do, Jim," Tex remonstrated. " That's givin' him all the edge. He'll shoot you when you go through the door."

" I want him to know who's comin' for him, and why. I'm givin' him his chance to fight or run. But if he runs he's got to go fast."

Barnes had scarcely entered the building when Tex exclaimed, " Look, Jim! There he goes!"

Marr Bradley, having left the saloon by a side door, was walking rapidly across a vacant space where the adjoining building had but recently been torn down. At precisely the same time two other Big Hat men, Baldy Tompkins and Bert Latch, emerged from the front door. Although Jim and Tex didn't know it, old man Barnes was pinned against the wall just inside by a young Big Hat puncher named Carl Vare, while Bill Thayne, the fifth Big Hat man, had followed Bradley out the side door and was coming directly up the side of the building.

The Big Hat men had been warned. They had had five minutes in which to plan their campaign, and it seemed to be enough.

Jim started down the sidewalk. " Bradley!" he called out.

The outlaw whirled, gun hand slapping leather. Jim started his draw at the same time, just as Bert Latch, gun already in hand, raised it to fire at Jim's back. Baldy Tompkins was set to take care of Tex.

Unmindful of his own danger Tex leaped and brought his gun barrel crashing down upon the head of Bert Latch. Before Baldy could shoot Tex, old Jeff Teeters from across the street brought him down with a bullet through the thigh. Bert Latch went down in an unconscious heap.

Even as Marr Bradley started his draw he seemed to lose his

nerve. Instead of standing his ground to shoot it out he leaped for the protection of the pile of old lumber toward which he had been heading. Jim's first shot barely grazed the outlaw's side, but the second ripped its way through the gunman's heart. Bradley's only shot went into the ground almost at his feet. The man grabbed at the end of a scantling, but it failed to hold his weight, and he slumped suddenly to the ground, bringing the lumber down on top of him.

Jim was still running forward. He didn't know about Bill Thayne till a bullet raked his collar bone and he went down. He was hurt. Badly hurt. But the shot had been a little too high to reach his heart. He knew that his and Bradley's fight was not the only one going on. It took a second or so to shake off the numbing paralysis of shock before he could get to his feet. But the battle was over. It had lasted less than fifty seconds.

CHAPTER XIX

Fate's Blows Fall Fast

Pauline had not yet located Pig Bratton when a burst of alarmed shouts took her outside with the rest of the people. She found herself caught in a crush of pale looking male clerks, but she saw Pig running toward his horse.

"What busted?" a clerk near her asked.

"All hell," another replied. "I got out here just in time to see men comin' out of the Amboy head first, feet first, rear end first—anyway to be first. There was glass a-crackin', men a-yellin', an' guns a-poppin'."

Pauline reached her horse, and had the animal in full gallop before she settled into the saddle. She drew up in front of the Amboy in a cloud of dust. Her eyes were only for Jim. She saw Pig Bratton stooped over a man lying on the ground, but it scarcely registered that the man was dead. Then she saw Jim supported by Tex Devore and Jeff Teeters. He was walking between them, but she knew he had been hurt.

She opened her mouth, but closed it without a sound. This was no time for her to betray her feelings. Then she saw Sheriff Sullivan walking behind the DX men with drawn gun.

Just then she saw shiftless Gus Johnson, the father of Maudie, and she called to him. The man removed his tattered hat and grinned up at her with tobacco-stained teeth.

"Shore lots of excitement around to-day," he vouchsafed.

"What happened?" she demanded huskily.

"Wa'al, the Big Hat boys was havin' themselves a drink when somebody tole 'em Jim Dysart an' the DX boys was comin' after 'em. Some went one way, some t'other. The

shootin' started outside, but we didn't know when it might come inside, an' I follered the man nex' t' me through the nearest winder. When I got 'round t' the front the fireworks was over. Marr Bradley was dead, an' a couple more Big Hat men wounded, an' Jim Dysart was wounded an' under arrest."

"But why arrest only Jim?" she asked.

"I heerd the sheriff say it was him started it. Marr Bradley was runnin' away when Jim shot him."

"Listen, Johnson: you saw Gooch killed last night. I want to know what happened. I want the truth."

The man looked unhappy. He wasn't half so eager to talk about that as he had been the fight. "I re'ly didn't see nothin'," he said. "All I know is whut I was tole."

"You mean you were told what to say, and threatened with something if you didn't tell it," she retorted.

"No, ma'am. When Mr. Bratton got me outa bed he said he was lookin' fer Gooch Dysart, an' he wanted somebody 'sides his own men along to see whut happened. He said Gooch had murdered your father, but that one o' his men had wounded him, an' he figgered he might try to git home."

"Well?"

"Shore nuff Gooch showed up jist before daybreak, an' he was purty sick. Looked like he'd been hit hard, an' he was sort o' hangin' on by the horn. He was plumb caught unaware when we rode out on him."

"Then what happened?"

"Wa-al, Mr. Bratton tol' me to come with 'em down here, but he let me go home to tell my ol' woman. Jist 'fore I got back I heerd a shot. When I got thaar Gooch was dead. They tol' me he tried to make a break an' Marr Bradley shot him."

Johnson was of no further use. Pauline turned away from him. She saw Bill Thayne and Carl Vare start to ride out of town. She had forgotten that on her horse she towered above the crowd and so was visible up and down Main Street, until she heard Pig Bratton call her name, and hurry toward her.

"Come on," he said, "I've got to get you off the street."

She followed as he turned into a side street, and finally stopped in a clump of cottonwoods beside the river.

"Where have you been?" he demanded. "I've been worried about you."

"You needn't have been," she said. "I can take care of myself."

"Do you know that your father is—is dead?"

"I know," she said. "Marr Bradley killed him."

"What? Who've you been talking to? Gooch Dysart killed your father."

"Gooch did not. My father would have been alive to-day, and the Denton gang captured if at least two of your men hadn't belonged to that gang."

"You mind telling me what proof you have?" he asked coldly.

"Rezner was caught cold acting the traitor and was killed," she said. "Bradley was seen talking with the outlaws."

"Of all the ridiculous things," he cried angrily. "You've been listening to Jim Dysart. I know nothing about Dutch, but I do know where Marr Bradley was. I had an idea the Denton gang might break back this way—it's my cattle they really want to steal—so I sent Marr out to scout that side of the range, and sure enough he run on to 'em. He was just outside their camp, tryin' to hear their plans, when Gooch Dysart rode in and told them he had shot your father."

"That's a lie!" she cried. "It was just the other way. Gooch listened and heard a man named Hauser say he had killed father. And Marr Bradley was with the outlaws in their camp."

"And who told you that fairy story?" he sneered.

She was silent. Telling him that Jim had told her could only hurt him. He knew it anyway.

"That's the Dysarts' story," he said. "Everybody knows Gooch ran with the Denton gang. You think anybody would believe him an' Jim were really tryin' to catch the outlaws?"

"I do."

"What really happened, my dear, was that Marr heard Gooch say he was coming in to throw the posse off the track so Denton could get away with a big bunch of my cattle. Marr sneaked away and waited on the trail for Gooch to come along, hoping to capture him. Gooch heard him and got away, but Marr was sure he had hit him. Marr raced on to the ranch, told me, and we picked Gooch Dysart up while he was trying to get home. He tried to escape and Marr shot him. Then Jim Dysart shot Marr down in cold blood. The last chapter will be when Jim Dysart climbs the gallows."

The girl could stand no more. She slid from her horse, and collapsed on the ground with long, bitter, almost soundless sobs.

Bratton sat his horse composedly, gazing down at her with malicious triumph.

"Your father's body should arrive soon," he said. "I'll take complete charge of everything. You know that my ranch is your home. If I were you I'd go there at once."

She was glad to be alone, but someone might come along any time. She couldn't get things straightened in her mind. She hadn't questioned Jim's story, yet Bratton's account sounded logical too, in so far as Gooch was concerned. It was possible, too, that Bratton was sincerely fooled by Marr Bradley. That, she decided, must be the truth.

Presently she brushed the dirt and leaves from her clothing and led her horse back to Main Street. At the moment she didn't know where to go or what to do.

Then she heard someone frantically calling her name, and she saw old Jeff Teeters trotting toward her as fast as his bent old legs could carry him. His face worked piteously. She didn't notice Stella Baxter's husband, Mark, a little behind him.

"Jeff! What is it?" she asked.

"It's Libby Dysart," Teeters said. "Mark Baxter just brought the word. She got killed."

"Killed? Oh, no!" she cried, aghast.

"A horse killed her," Mark Baxter took up the tale. "Seems as if she got out of bed soon after you left, Miss Lant, and saddled that Selim horse to come down here. The Johnson woman claims she tried to stop her but couldn't. She said she was goin' to see Gooch and nobody could stop her. I guess maybe they couldn't. Anyway, she got on the horse, but something went wrong. Mrs. Johnson said she thought Libby started to fall before the horse started to buck. Anyway, she was thrown off and her head hit a rock."

Somehow the tragedy in her own life seemed to dim before the multiple blows which fate was raining upon Jim Dysart. The last of his family dead, and he charged with murder.

"Does Jim know?" she asked.

"Not yet. We don't know how to break it to him," Jeff said. "He's purty badly shot up."

"Where is he?"

"In Doc Wilkerson's office. Doc told the sheriff he wouldn't let him take Jim to jail, so Sullivan is goin' to set a guard over him in one o' Doc's extra rooms."

"I wonder if they'll let me see him."

Jim had been put to bed when she reached the doctor's office. Wilkerson, Tex Devore, and a self-important young deputy sheriff named Snow Smith were in the office.

"May I see Jim?" she asked the doctor.

The young deputy answered before the doctor could speak. "Nobody sees him without an order. He's under arrest."

"I think it would be safe for you to see him in a few minutes," the doctor stated tranquilly. "His wound is painful and weakening, and will keep him in bed for a couple of weeks, but fortunately the bullet struck no vital spot, and broke no bones."

"I said——" began the deputy.

"Have you heard that Mrs. Dysart has just been killed by a horse?" Pauline asked, and her voice broke in spite of her.

Even the deputy looked shocked.

"You'd better tell him, Pauline," Wilkerson said.

"You think I should?"

"No, on second thought I believe it should be kept from him for a while. Smith, I'm counting on you to see that he doesn't hear about that," the doctor said sternly.

The deputy offered no objection when Pauline went into the other room, but he followed her inside. So did the doctor.

Jim looked up with a faint grin. "Hello, Pauline," he said. "Things happen fast sometimes, don't they?"

She stood in the middle of the room, fighting back the emotion which threatened to overcome her. She was thankful for the doctor's strong hands on her shoulders. She dared not take a step nearer the bed lest she let herself go completely.

"Is there anything I can do, Jim?" she asked.

"Yes, there is. Seems like I'm goin' to be detained for a few days. Sheriff Sullivan says him an' his deputies like my company."

His voice sobered. "Mom's goin' to be in a state, Paul. I wish you'd go up and explain to her why I can't come home. Better see Polly, too."

"I will, Jim," she promised.

She was glad to get out of the room. Tex followed her to the street. From him she got a true account of the gun battle.

"But if the Big Hat men were looking for a fight how can they hold Jim and not—not the rest of them?" she asked.

"Jim was givin' Bradley a lot more chance than he should have done, but it happened to be Bradley who got killed. An' you know we ain't got no positive proof Bradley was a Denton men. All we've got is Gooch's word, and even if he was alive it wouldn't be worth a thing," Tex said.

"Tex, you don't really believe they can *hang* Jim, do you?" she gasped.

"Hell, no. No jury in this county would convict him, but they'll probably keep him under arrest till Pig Bratton can finish lootin' the DX."

She left Tex and went over to the Bryan cottage. Some gossip had already been in to tell Polly about the shooting fray. The crippled girl was in worse state than Pauline had ever seen her. It took nearly an hour to convince Polly that Jim was in no great danger from either the law or his injury. In reassuring Polly, Pauline almost convinced herself.

Someone brought her word that the bodies of her father and Pee-wee Rust were at the undertaker's. Gene Partee and the posse had returned. "Here I am worrying you over my little troubles when you have so much more of your own," Polly said regretfully. "You must stay here until it is all over."

"I'll be all right," Pauline assured her.

She walked to the undertaker's, and though she bit her under lip until the blood came she had steeled herself for this moment and she didn't break down. She knew that Dave Lant had not been sorry to go. The smile on his dead face seemed to be telling her that now she was free.

She looked at him as long as she could bear it, then left the room. Pig Bratton was awaiting her in the undertaker's parlour.

"Sit down, Pauline," he ordered.

"What do you want of me?" she asked wearily, but she sank into a chair.

" I want you to quit running around with the Dysart crowd," he said angrily. " Jim Dysart is a gone gosling, and nothing you can say or do can help him. Even if he can't be convicted of murder he'll go to the pen, and he's broke."

If even Pig held doubts abouts Jim's conviction, she thought, there must be hope. " I don't believe it," she said flatly.

" I happen to have a lease on Grizzly Meadows," he boasted. " Without that winter range Dysart is done, and he knows it. But that isn't all, my dear. In his anxiety to get that lease for himself he has laid himself wide open. He attempted to bribe a public official, so that if he does get off a murder charge on the ground of self-defence he'll go over the road for bribery."

" It—it's impossible," she breathed.

" It's quite true. I advise you to see Senator Cole if you have any doubts. He was the man Dysart tried to bribe to withhold my bid and substitute his own. Cole, like an honourable man, notified me, so when Dysart and Partee came to the bank to get the money my cashier gave them marked currency.

The girl was utterly bewildered. Bratton wouldn't have spoken so confidently if he hadn't been sure of his ground. Yet her faith in Jim's integrity never wavered.

" Listen, Pig," she forced herself to say presently, " does any one else know about this—this alleged bribery ? "

" As yet no one but Senator Cole and the cashier of the bank."

" You could make Cole drop it if you wanted to."

" Well, I suppose I could, but that don't happen to be my nature, my dear, I take every advantage over an enemy I can get."

" Sometimes," she pointed out, " a hold may slip."

" It hasn't yet," he laughed.

" One hold has," she retorted. " You thought you had a hold on my father that would force me to marry you, but you don't have that any more."

" Wait," he shot out as she started to arise. " I still think you're too proud to have it become public knowledge that your father was a thief."

" You never were more mistaken in your life," she said with icy firmness. " Dave Lant otherwise lived an honourable and useful life. He died like a man. That will weigh more now than any scandal you may be able to prove on him."

" You mean that you won't marry me ? " he ground out.

" Not for that reason," she said steadily.

" What do you mean then ? "

" I mean I'll marry you only on condition that you drop your fight against Jim Dysart."

" You mean not prosecute him for bribery in case he gets off on this murder charge ? " he asked slyly.

" Oh, no," she stated evenly. " I mean a lot more than that. I don't propose to sell myself cheaply. You'll see that Jim

gets the Grizzly Meadows, and you'll sign an agreement with him for a fair division of the range."

She felt sickened with fear as well as shame when he got up abruptly and started for the door. It had taken the last bit of pride from her to offer to become this man's wife at any price, and now it seemed he thought her asking price was too high. Bitterly she wished that it was she on a slab in the next room instead of her father.

Bratton reached the door and came back. "You really mean that," he said, as if speaking to himself. "I'm the biggest fool on earth, but I've been crazy about you ever since you came back here." His voice took on a certain hoarseness. "I've got to have you at any price, but I won't be stalled off. I've either got to start that prosecution for bribery to-morrow or let it drop. That means you've got to carry out your part of the bargain to-night."

"With my father still unburied?" she cried in horror. "Never!"

"All right," he said shortly, "I'll give you till just two hours after the funeral."

CHAPTER XX

A Puzzler for Partee

Being accused of murder was the least of Jim's troubles. He didn't believe any jury would convict him for killing the murderer of his brother, especially since Bradley had had warning and could have escaped had he chosen to do so, instead of trying to participate in a mass murder, which might have happened had the fellow been able to reach the shelter of the lumber pile he had been making for. He did not yet realize how the fact that he had started for the Amboy, knowing the Big Hat men were inside, and the further fact that he had fired the first shot might be twisted into making him look like a cold-blooded killer.

He did sense, however, that the outcome of the whole business might depend upon the establishment of the fact that Marr Bradley was a member of the Denton gang, and it was here that his helplessness pinched.

While he lay flat on his back his enemies would have a free hand, despite the efforts of his own loyal friends.

Dr. Wilkerson came in after Pauline had gone. "I want you to keep quiet," he insisted. "If you want anything you just tell Smith here, and he can get it, or summon the nurse at the other end of the hall."

"My order is not to leave this room," the deputy grunted.

Things could scarcely look blacker. Gooch was dead, and

Jim felt but little less grief because of Dave Lant and Pee-wee, even though he and Dave had quarrelled violently. Badly as he felt he recognized that the grief of his mother and Pauline was worse. Then, too, there was Polly. She, too, would feel badly.

It seemed sacrilegious somehow to keep thinking of money at such a time, but he couldn't help it. He wasn't selfish. Had never been. But he had the responsibility of providing for his mother, and Polly and her mother on his shoulders. Even if his friends could recover the cattle the rustlers had been compelled to turn loose on the Big Hat range, which in itself was doubtful, he had lost enough others to strain his credit badly.

Everything, he had to acknowledge, now depended upon getting the Grizzly Meadows lease. He had daily been growing more and more uneasy about that. He wanted to see Senator Cole, but there was no use to send for the man with the deputy sheriff squatting there. Some time later he heard Tex coming back, and he was not alone. Old Gene Partee was with him.

" Hell of a time for you to git shot up," Partee greeted.

" I know it," Jim acknowledged. " Right when I ought to be out after Cy Denton and his gang while the trail is hot."

" It ain't so hot, I'm afraid," Partee said. " Not much chance of them bein' in a hundred miles of here now."

" Maybe not Denton himself, but what about the ones that work for Bratton ? I noticed they were plenty eager to back up Bradley."

The deputy sheriff stirred quickly at that.

" I'd lay two to one they rode with Denton before they come here," Tex put in.

" You fellers are crazy," Deputy Smith snorted.

" I'm goin' to try to get your cattle back," Tex said, " but it looks like me an' Jeff Teeters would have to do it alone. These fellows that rode with Gene were keen to be with a big posse chasin' outlaws, but they don't want the work of ridin' for cows."

" I'm goin' to see Bratton and make a flat demand he help us out," Gene Partee stated.

" And I'll lay you two to one he won't turn a finger," Tex offered.

" Well, Jim's all in ; we gotta git out of here," Partee said.

" Before they go," Jim said, " Deputy, will you ask that nurse for a wet rag to put on my head ? "

" What's the matter with one o' your friends——"

" Are you afraid we'll carry him out while your back is turned ? " Partee demanded witheringly.

The deputy sullenly departed to look for the nurse. All Jim wanted was to get him out of the room.

" Look," has said rapidly, " I may be a little sick, but I may have to get out of here just the same. There's a used stable

back of Polly Bryan's. Put my horse there and have somebody feed it. Wait, don't argue. Gene, I want you to see Senator Cole. Ask him about that lease. It ought to be through right now. I've simply got to have Grizzly Meadows."

"I'll do better than that," Partee said. "I'll wire a lawyer friend of mine at the States Capitol and have him look it up."

"Thanks, let me know as soon as you can."

They could hear the deputy hurrying back. "Your gun will be in the feed-box in that stable just in case," Tex said hastily.

For the next two days Jim Dysart was a sick man. Fever claimed him, and he groaned and tossed, much of the time in semi-delirium. Dr. Wilkerson kept a nurse with him all the time, and one or the other of the two deputy sheriffs, Smith or Ortwell, were always on guard. The only visitor allowed to see him was Gene Partee. The third morning found Jim better. He felt pitifully weak, but the fever was gone and his mind was clear. He had lost track of time, and was amazed when Smith told him what day it was.

"There's a big funeral this afternoon, but you won't be there," the deputy grinned. "Too bad, since your relation will be guest of honour."

"Nice sense of humour you have, Smith," Jim said bitterly. "You mean to tell me that I'm still under arrest?"

"Why else am I settin' here? It ain't because I like your company."

Jim closed his eyes and pretended to be asleep. About ten o'clock the doctor and Gene Partee came in.

"Well, you look a hundred per cent better this morning," Dr. Wilkerson said. "Looks like the fever had burned a lot of poison out of you. I may let you have a little chicken soup this evening. Think you could eat it?"

"I could eat a horse," Jim said.

"I'll feed you a horse for breakfast if you keep getting better," the doctor chuckled.

"Gene, how is everybody?" Jim asked. "Have you heard from my mother?"

"Your mother is being well cared for," the doctor answered quickly.

Partee cut in hastily, "Tex an' Jeff have rounded up most of yore stolen cattle. Pig Bratton didn't try to stop 'em."

"Good of him," Jim said sardonically. "His gunmen still around?"

"Two of 'em blame well are," Tex said grimly. "I ain't heard of the rest of 'em leavin'."

"Pig puzzles me," Partee declared. "He come to me yesterday an' wanted to know if we had any real evidence that Rezner an' Bradley belonged to Denton's gang. Said if we had that he'd go to the county attorney with me an' ask to have this murder charge against you dismissed."

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him we had some evidence, but that he'd likely git more if he'd ask the other members of his crew."

"You think they can make a murder charge stick?" Jim asked. "Let's have it straight."

"I don't think so, Jim, but they may keep you locked up a long time, and they may try to whittle it down an' get a verdict of manslaughter. We can't be plumb safe till we prove Bradley was an outlaw," Partee said.

"About that other business—have you heard anything?" Jim asked with more anxiety than he had shown about the murder charge.

"No, I ain't," Partee replied. "I'll drift over to the post office after a bit. Might be somethin' on the mornin' mail."

Partee soon took his departure. He and the doctor had agreed to say nothing to Jim about his mother's death until the funeral was over. Partee was old, rather shrivelled up, and usually he was crippled from rheumatism—not much to look at, but one of the old timers whom the community honoured for things not connected with making money.

Men like Pig Bratton might dominate a community by their aggressiveness, but they could never earn the esteem which men like Partee, or his old neighbour, Bill Dysart, or even Bill's son Jim could hold.

He had sold out to Pig Bratton, and in a way his financial intersts were tied up with Bratton. He had helped Jim Dysart out purely and simply because he liked him. He had loaned Jim money which he knew might never be repaid, and even more important, he had persuaded Tex Devore, his old foreman, to come back and work for Jim.

The daily mail had just been distributed when he reached the office. There were people standing in line, but the clerk on duty handed Partee his mail before he had to ask for it. He retired to a wall stand close by a window to look it over.

A minute later he straightened up, and an angry glitter came into his faded old black eyes. The letter was from his attorney in the capital, and it read:

"Dear Gene:

I looked up the matter of the Grizzly Meadows lease as soon as I got your wire. A ten-year lease on this tract was issued only last week to Homer Bratton. I find no record that an application was filed with the State Land Board by any other party.

Sincerely yours,
Wade M. Ellis, Attorney-at-law."

"The dirty, double-crossin' snake!" Partee muttered into his beard. People in the post office looked at him curiously as he left the building.

It chanced that Pauline was just leaving the undertaking parlour after a last look in private at her father when Partee passed.

"Mr. Partee," she called. "How is Jim?"

He stopped and waited for her. "A lot better this mornin'," he said. "Only I got some news that'll shore bowl him over if he gets it."

"What is that?" she asked.

He handed her the letter he had just received. "I loaned Jim the money to git that lease," he said when she had read it. "He was double-crossed by old Cole."

"I know," she replied. "Cole is ready to charge that the money Jim paid him was a bribe. Only he won't do it. You can tell Jim he doesn't need to worry. He'll get Grizzly Meadows."

"But how? Hell, Pig Bratton wouldn't sell it to Jim in a month of Sundays."

"Pig will change his attitude toward Jim. I can assure you he will transfer the lease."

"You got somethin' on that skunk? What is it?" the old cowman asked. "You kin trust me. Mebbe I kin help yuh put on the squeeze."

"I can handle it all right alone," she told him. "But—thanks."

Partee went on his slow way puzzled. He simply couldn't believe that Bratton would transfer so valuable a property willingly, yet Pauline wouldn't lie. It must be she had caught him in some skullduggery.

He happened to look up and see Senator Cole's shingle. A direct-actionist always, he marched up the stairs and without knocking turned the knob of the door. He gave a look of grim satisfaction as he saw Pig Bratton in the lawyer's office.

"Well, Mr. Partee, glad to see you," Cole greeted uneasily. "Always glad to see you, but did you have an appointment?"

"Got one now," Partee grunted. "Mebbe it's Bratton I want to see anyway. Pig, is it true you're goin' to transfer the lease to Grizzly Meadows to Jim Dysart?"

"News gets around," Bratton smirked. "I wasn't aware anybody knew I'd even got that lease except the senator here and myself."

"Are you transferrin' it?" Partee insisted.

"I might possibly be induced to."

"I loaned Jim the money which he gave Cole here to apply for that lease for Jim. How come you to apply in Bratton's name Cole, instead of the man you offered to help?"

"The senator has been my attorney ever since I've been here," Bratton said quickly.

"You took Jim's money," Partee persisted.

"Which was offered as a bribe for me to double-cross Mr. Bratton," Cole said nervously. "I may drop the bribery

charges and keep the money as attorney fees if he doesn't try to make trouble."

"You're a dirty snake, Cole," Partee charged deliberately "Anybody knows the DX ought to have that range. The Big Hat never used it, never needed it, but the DX always had it."

"I said I'd transfer it," Bratton said. "What're you beefin' about? He's just lucky the senator doesn't choose to send him to the pen."

Partee regarded the pair of them with unconcealed bitterness and disdain. "I'll believe you, Bratton, when I see that transfer. If you're actin' in good faith fix it up right now an' hand it to me. I'll take it to Jim."

"There's no hurry. I'll fix it up in good time," Bratton sneered.

"You couldn't expect Mr. Bratton to bother about that on the very eve of his wedding, could you?" Cole interjected with malicious humour which found no response from Pig Bratton.

"Shut up, will you, you fool?" Pig rasped, but old Gene Partee's ears were open and his mind going like a blow-torch.

"Who the hell would marry you, Pig?" he sneered with a deliberate taunt to Bratton's vanity. "When does the ceremony come off?"

"If it'll take a weight off your withered-up brain, Partee, I and Miss Lant are getting married this evening."

"Very funny," Partee retorted. "Now you tell one, Senator."

The sardonic grin left his face as soon as he was out in the hall.

"What a stupid old ass I've been," he thought savagely. "Couldn't add two an' two so they made four." Now he knew why Pauline had been so sure about the lease, and in that respect she was right. From every indication Bratton, unbelievable as it seemed, meant to keep his word.

Old Gene Partee suddenly found himself wrestling with one of the toughest problems he had faced in his seventy-four years of life. He was fond of Pauline, and he liked and respected Jim. He had known them both since they were born.

If he held his peace Jim would get Grizzly Meadows and save the DX. But Pauline's whole life would be ruined by a forced marriage with a man Partee knew that she despised. If he told Jim what the girl planned to do he knew that come hell or high water Jim would find a way to stop it.

It was a hard decision to make.

CHAPTER XXI

"Don't go to Shootin'"

The funeral, Jim thought, would just be beginning. In a way he was glad that he wasn't able to be there. He could have done no good, and he would at least be spared the agony of watching Pauline's grief. He had no inkling that his mother, as well as his brother, was being buried.

Slow steps coming down the corridor aroused both his and Deputy Snow Smith's curiosity. It was not the doctor's brisk footsteps, and they thought everyone else would be at the funeral. It proved to be Gene Partee.

"You again?" the deputy grunted, feigning great disgust.

"Yeh, it's me, an' I want a private talk with Jim," Partee retorted. "Make yoreself scarce about five minutes."

"Not me," the deputy grinned. "I like private talks."

"Beat it before I take that silly gun away from you an' beat your brains out with it," Partee said furiously. "You know damn well a man as sick as Jim couldn't get out of that bed if he tried. You know he'll never be tried for murder. This whole business is to give Sullivan a little free publicity. Now git out o' here."

"You can't talk to me like that, old man," the deputy yelped. "You git out of here yourself, pronto." He started to give Partee a shove, but the old cowman struck his arm away angrily.

"There's a little practice at the sheriff's office that you an' Sullivan wouldn't like to have aired, Smith," Partee said. "It has to do with the sale o' stray horses. That fine brown you ride, for instance. That horse was a stray. How come it ain't got the state brand a stray always has when it's sold by the county?"

Smith wet suddenly dry lips. "I bought that horse," he said weakly.

"Like hell you did. You put your own brand on it, an' all you ever paid the state was a feed bill. Me, I'm allus interested in horse trades, an' I have lots of time to watch since I've retired. That ain't the first time you an' Sullivan have sold stray horses to yourselves for a feed bill. Are you gonna git out of here, or ain't you?"

"I don't like your attitude," Smith said stiffly, "but I suppose I can let you have five minutes alone."

"You old cuss," Jim said. "You sure do keep yourself posted."

"It pays," Partee said shortly. "I'm posted on somethin' else, too, that ain't so good. Brace yourself for bad news."

" My mother ? " Jim asked.

Gene Partee gave a guilty start. His mind had been so full of the other matter that he had temporarily forgotten about Mrs. Dysart.

" I—I——" he stammered.

" She's dead," Jim stated.

" Gawd, Jim, I hate to give it to you with both barrels," Partee said. " We didn't mean to tell you till afterward, but they're buryin' her to-day, along with Gooch, Dave an' Pee-wee."

Jim lay back with his eyes closed. Grief, deeper than he had ever believed possible, burned his soul. Weak and ineffectual as she was, Libby Dysart had never willingly harmed any one. Jim, of late years, had felt responsible for her welfare. Tears welled out from beneath his closed eyelids.

" Tell me," he said presently.

Gently as he could Partee told of the shocking manner in which the news of Gooch's death had been conveyed to her, and of her attempt to ride the Selim horse to town.

" She didn't suffer, Jim. She was killed instantly," he finished.

" Polly, and now Mom," Jim murmured. " I kept her off that horse for years. Now this happens. It must have been my fault."

Partee was glad now that he had other news to break, even if it was bad news. It might serve to get Jim's mind off his mother's death.

" I've got to give you the other barrel now, Jim," he said. " You've lost Grizzly Meadows."

Jim was silent so long that the old cattleman thought he hadn't heard. Then Jim said, " You mean Bratton's got it ? "

" Yes. Old Cole double-crossed you. Even conspired with Bratton to see that you got marked money to give him, so they could say you tried to bribe him into givin' you advance information an' other stuff."

" I guess I was a sucker," Jim said grimly.

" The rest I got to say is something I'm purty shore I should never say, but I figgered it was somethin' you'd want to know. Pauline Lant is marryin' Pig Bratton after the funeral today."

" What ? Marryin' that hog the day her father is buried ? Gene, I can't believe that. I know Paul too well."

" The point is, James, Bratton will assign the lease of Grizzly Meadows over to you."

Jim looked a long time at the ceiling.

" I thought you'd want to know," Partee said uneasily.

" Of course I do. If you hadn't told me, and I'd ever found out you knew I think I'd have killed you," Jim said, and Partee knew that he meant it.

Deputy Snow re-entered the room as soon as Partee departed,

but he lacked his usual smirking complacency, although he tried to conceal the sheepishness he felt by blustering.

Jim cut him short. " Look, Smith," he said, " I don't want to hear your opinion of Gene Partee. All I want right now is that brand book in my vest pocket. It's hangin' there in that closet. Will you git it for me ? "

" I reckon I might," the deputy said sullenly.

To reach the closet the deputy had to walk past the head of the bed. With almost ridiculous ease Jim reached out and lifted the officer's gun as he walked past.

" Hey ! " Smith cried out, as he slapped his hand holster-ward a half second too late. " What's the idee——"

" Shut up ! " Jim held the gun pressed against the man's kidney. " I'm partin' company with you directly, but until I do you better obey orders. I've worked up an awful dislike for that ugly pan of yours since I've been layin' here. Lock that door on the inside then get my clothes out of the closet an' lay 'em on that chair."

" Hell, yo're crazy," Smith said. " You'll collapse before you git downstairs."

" Never mind that. Do as I say."

The officer backed to the door and sprang the catch. The look in Jim's eye warned him not to try any tricks. Then he got Jim's clothes and backed against the farther wall when told.

Jim laid the gun on the bed and began to dress with the movements of an old, slow man. There had been a moment when he first swung his feet over the bed when he thought he would faint, but that quickly passed. He moved slowly so as not to start the bleeding. Fortunately the wound was well bandaged.

Several times Smith started forward as Jim bent over, but he always fell back when Jim reached for the gun. At last Jim sat on the edge of the bed, fully clothed. He tore three strips from a sheet, then ordered the protesting deputy to lie down on his belly.

" Don't argue," he snapped. " What do you think I'm leaving here for—to attend a funeral ? "

" I—I don't know."

" You will know when you read the papers to-morrow," Jim said grimly. " If you want to live to satisfy your curiosity get down there."

He used one strip to tie the deputy's hands behind his back, another to tie his feet, and the third he tied tightly over the man's mouth.

Jim felt weak and tottery when he finished, but two or three minutes rest and a drink of water from the picture by his bed-side restored some of his strength. He was sure that practically everyone in town would be at the funeral. Even the doctor's day nurse had gone after asking Smith if he could care for her patient. Wilkerson, he knew, was out in the country

on a case. He closed the door carefully and descended the stairs.

The street was empty. Strangely, he felt stronger than when he started. He boldly crossed the street and walked toward the Bryan cottage at the edge of town.

Smith would be floundering around and making a noise, and even if he didn't attract somebody's attention he would probably release himself in an hour or so. He hoped desperately that Tex and Gene had kept their promise to leave his horse in the Bryan stable.

It was there! He got the saddle on, and found his own gun in the grain-box. When the horse was ready to be mounted he walked to the back door of the cottage and let himself in. But he knocked on Polly's door.

"Come in," came the girl's soft voice. "Jim!" she exclaimed as he entered. "Jim, what on earth? Why aren't you at the funeral?"

"Hello, Polly," he said smiling.

"Jim, you're sick. You mustn't be out like this," she cried.

"I'm all right, Polly," he said. "I haven't much time, dear. Pauline will be in to see you after a while. I want you to tell her something for me."

"All right, Jim," the girl said steadily. "What is it?"

"Just tell her this: 'The old cave under the black pine is still there.'"

"But what does it mean?" Polly queried. "Is it some sort of joke?"

"Far from it, Polly. It's nothing for you to worry about, but Paul will understand."

"All right, Jim, I'll tell her. You love her very much, don't you, Jim?"

"Why, you know who I love, silly," he tried to say lightly, but his voice was heavy.

"Yes, I know. You loved your mother, too. You and Pauline must marry, Jim. I want you both to be happy."

"You're a brick if there ever was one, but you let your imagination run away with you. I can assure you there's nothing between me and Pauline. We're like brother and sister. Besides, Pauline is slated to marry Pig Bratton right away."

"That creature! She can't," Polly said indignantly. "If she tries that I'll tell her what I think of her."

Jim cupped her chin in his hand and lifted her face. "You'll do nothing of the kind, little sprout. You'll tell her just what I told you to, and you won't mention her marriage. Now I've got to rush." He stooped and kissed her.

Jim used the cottonwoods along the river as a screen to get out of town, but once out of sight he put his horse to a steady, mile-eating lope which brought him to the edge of his own range in perhaps two hours and a half.

Long before this the funeral would be over, and his escape

made known. He was making a long gamble that he could prevent Pauline's marriage to Pig Bratton from taking place that night. After that, well, he had no plans.

All the way from Star to Dysart numerous creeks rushed out from the hills on the west side of the valley to join the river. Some of them were almost as large as the river itself. The largest of all was Dysart Creek, which ran past the DX ranch and emptied into the river at Dysart post office. But in its course from mountain to river it detoured around a large, flat-topped butte, and since it was constantly gnawing at the foot of the butte it had cut various channels and in places the cut-banks rose as much as a hundred feet high.

At one place the stream had suddenly cut away from the butte leaving an old dry channel some twenty feet wide and fifty feet deep. That had happened when Jim was a boy. He had explored the channel, and far back had discovered a semicircular cave. He had showed the place to his two brothers and Pauline. They had sworn a childish oath not to reveal this secret cavern to anyone. It was to be their own private citadel. Jim didn't believe any of them had ever broken their word. In fact what he feared was that Pauline might have forgotten it. But he didn't think so.

Each fall, for some reason, curiosity perhaps, although he always told himself he was looking for cattle, Jim had forced his way through that now brush-choked channel to the cave. It was his present destination.

He stayed clear of Dysart and the main road, and was certain that no one had seen him. Even the few ranchers up here were at the funeral.

He was pleased to find a trickle of water close above the cave, and there was forage enough to last his horse for several days. He unsaddled, staked the horse, and carrying saddle and blanket into the cave made himself the best bed that he could and prepared to wait.

Directly above the cut-bank in which the cave was located stood the blackened stump of an old pine tree. If Pauline remembered at all that tree would guide her to her destination.

She would come. He knew that. But would she come before she married Pig Bratton ? He could only hope. She would know that the marriage had something to do with his escape. His guess was that when she heard the news she would at once go to see Polly Bryan.

He had hoped that Pauline might arrive before dark, but she didn't come. The deepest dungeon could not have been darker than that cave. He felt that if he could only get food he would be all right. Pauline hadn't come. It must be that he had guessed wrong. Right now, probably, she was being married to Pig Bratton.

Why, he asked himself bitterly, hadn't he just concealed himself somewhere and ended all possibility of that marriage

by a well-directed bullet. He knew, however, that he couldn't have done that. When the moment came his conscience would have demanded that he give his foe warning just as he had given Marr Bradley warning.

He fell at length into a troubled, uneasy sleep, from which he was roused by the sound of voices.

Betrayed! As the thought flashed through his brain he reached for his gun and sat up swiftly. The curious thought passed through his mind that he was stiffened by cold. He wondered if he could shoot straight.

Then came Pauline's voice, half-subdued yet anxious. "Jim! Jim!" she called. "Are you there?"

"I'm here," he returned calmly enough, "but who's with you?"

"It's me, Jim—Jeff Teeters. Hell's fire, don't go to shootin'."

CHAPTER XXII

A Message from the Dead

It took several minutes for Pauline and Jeff to reach the mouth of the cave. Once Jeff slipped and fell. He cursed the darkness bitterly.

"I wasn't expectin' so much company," Jim said mildly.

Pauline scrambled into the cave. "I knew you had to have supplies, and I didn't have a chance to bring any. I told Jeff what to bring and where to meet me, but we couldn't either one do anything until after dark."

"You're sure then you wasn't followed?"

"Quite so. But, Jim, why did you come here? Dr. Wilkerson said any violent exercise might cost you your life. And there wasn't any need for it. You never could be convicted of killing Marr Bradley," she said.

"I wasn't worried about that."

She was silent so long that Jeff Teeters felt it incumbent to speak. "What in hell was yuh worried about then?" he asked.

"Just to make sure that nobody is following you better go down to the mouth of the channel and wait," Jim said dryly.

"I get it," Jeff grumbled. "Wish I'd stayed there in the first place."

"We had to leave our horses and fight our way through the brush," Pauline said.

"I blazed a trail, but I guess it wasn't much help when you couldn't see the blazes," Jim replied. He tried to make his voice sound casual as he asked, "You by any chance married?"

"No," she replied after a minute or so, "not yet. But I'm going to be. Jim, this was a silly thing to do. Of course I

know why you did it. I talked with Gene Partee before I went to see Polly."

"You know me so little you think I'd take Grizzly Meadows as a gift from Pig Bratton, knowing you'd sold yourself to get it ?"

"'Sold' isn't a nice word, Jim."

"But a true one."

"That isn't the only reason I'm marrying Pig. If I don't he will prove that my father was a thief."

"It's hard to believe, but I've been afraid of that. I knew about the note he had my mother sign. If that's why you're marrying Bratton I've no more to say. But get this straight now and forever : I'll never take Grizzly Meadows from Bratton."

"But why ?" she argued. "It will be a simple business transaction. You buy his lease, that's all."

"I'll not take it."

"Jim, you're a stubborn fool. It's not your welfare that matters and you know it. It's Polly's. You've no right to sentence her to poverty because of your own foolish pride."

"He never in God's world would sell to me unless you marry him, and you know it. Can't you see where that leaves me ?" he demanded.

"It's no worse for you to swallow your pride than it is me. We've got to think of Polly. You'll be hunted down if you don't surrender, and Polly can't stand a blow like that, Jim."

"You're makin' it mighty hard, Paul, but I only know this : If you marry Pig Bratton I'll kill him—or he'll kill me."

"I don't know what to say to you, Jim, but I've got to marry Pig."

"Why did you have Jeff bring along provisions if you expected to talk me into going back ?"

"I don't know. I guess I knew you would go your own headstrong way, and I couldn't bear to have you suffering."

"How come you didn't marry him to-night as planned ?"

"You know why. I had to see you first. I could wring Gene Partee's leathery old neck for telling you."

"I could kiss him."

"We're getting nowhere, Jim. Don't you realize I have to do what I have to do. And if you stay in hiding you'll wind up by killing somebody that they *can* hang for you. And you may get someone else into trouble, too. You know that old Jeff down there would die for you in a minute. I think Tex Devore and Amos Kittel would do the same. Jim, won't you give yourself up ? For my sake ?"

"I love you," he said.

There was a queer catch in her voice when she answered, "I know. I love you, too. But we could never get married as long as Polly lives. You know that. She may live for years."

He could have told him what Dr. Wilkerson had told him, but he wouldn't.

"It's better the way I want it," she maintained. "Even Gene Partee agrees with me. I made him see it." She groped for his hand in the darkness and found it. Her firm, hard little hand felt cold in his own feverish palm.

"You're a sick man, Jim. I can't leave you out here in this cold cave. Whether you like it or not I'm going to send Partee and Tex up here to bring you in."

"Why not the sheriff?" he asked.

She dropped his hand abruptly. "That's probably the most unfair thing you ever said," she told him sadly. "You know I'd not send the sheriff. I'll have Jeff come back to-morrow night to see if you want anything."

"If I go back with you will you promise not to marry Bratton?"

"No."

"Then I'll stay here. But get this for sure, Paul: I'll never accept that lease, or anything else from Bratton if you are married to him."

She left the cave to summon Jeff, and eventually they got back with the two horses and bedding and food. They had another argument as to what Jim should be permitted to eat, and finally compromised on a can of tomatoes until morning. It was nearly three in the morning before Pauline and Jeff finally took their departure. More comfortable now, Jim lay down and slept.

He felt stronger when he awoke. When he got outside the cave he was amazed to see how high the sun was in the heavens. His horse gave him a friendly nicker and he went down to lead the animal to water.

Returning to the cave he inspected his store of provisions while wondering if it would be safe to build a fire. There were plenty of dry willows which wouldn't make much smoke and he decided to take a chance. First, however, he moved the pile of provisions from the mouth of the cave to the back.

He had just dropped the half-filled gunny-bag Jeff had brought when his eye fell upon something white in a little recess just level with his eyes. It was an envelope!

Wonderingly Jim drew it out from the nook. His first thought was that Pauline must have left a message, but he couldn't remember her going to the back of the cave. He carried it hastily out into the light. It was sealed, and there was a single word on the outside. JIM.

Hastily tearing open the envelope he saw several sheets of writing. Before starting to read he looked for the inscription at the end, although he was pretty certain what the name would be. It was "Gooch."

For a moment Jim's hand trembled so that he couldn't hold the paper still enough to read it. Only yesterday Gooch had

been laid in his grave, and here was a word from him. What would he have to say?

It proved to be a jerky, troubled letter; written by a man with much on his mind. He began by saying he had no other place to leave a message, and expressed a hope that Jim might some day find it—" if anything happens to me." If nothing happened he hoped to retrieve and destroy the letter before Jim discovered it.

The letter was written the day of Ted Dysart's funeral. Apparently Gooch had written and left it in the cave just before or just after his visit to his mother. There was a great deal of regret and repentance in the first part of the letter. He condemned his own weakness bitterly. He was, he admited, solely to blame for Ted's death by leading his brother into wickedness. He knew that his selfishness was responsible for Jim's financial troubles. Jim frowned. What it amounted to was a plea of justification on the ground of moral weakness. That had been Gooch from the first. He was dead now, and Jim could feel no malice.

Then the letter took a different tone. " I'm through with Pig Bratton and Cy Denton both," Gooch wrote. " Bratton got me and Ted to gamble with him. We won. Then he brought in a couple of professionals who were dressed like sheepherders. That was the big cleaning, but it was our own fault, maybe. I kept losing money to Pig, but I pretended to think he was all right because I wanted to get back at him. Then I got in with Cy Denton, and it looked like me and Ted could get a lot back by helping Denton rustle Big Hat cows.

" Then I found out that Denton was stealing your cows, Jim, and that at least some of Bratton's men were helping him. I know that Bradley, Thayne and Rezner belong to Denton's gang and there may be others. I mean to find out.

" Jim, I mean to get your cattle back somehow. If I fail and they get me, and you ever find this letter, here is something may help you. Denton has two trails into Montana. One is over Horse Pass where cows can be driven, the other is a short-cut through Wood Canyon which they can use to ride back and forth, but can't drive cows over.

" The thing that may help you though, Jim, is knowing where Denton's hideout is, and this will knock your eyes out because it is within twenty miles of Star. Those devils are smart, Jim. You know the old Thunderbolt placer diggin's. Only way into them was over the old dugway pack trail that started at Amos Kittel's ranch below Star. That's Denton's headquarters. They can cross back from Montana down Wood Canyon, ride across the back of the Big Hat range, up over the pack trail an' hole up in old Thunderbolt. If anybody sees 'em there they're just placer mining.

" But there's one other thing, Jim. Nobody has ever been known to get all the way down Thunderbolt Gorge, but Denton

knows more about it than anybody else, and if they were chased down there they've got ambushes where they could wipe out an army, and make no mistake they've got grub enough cached there to last them a year."

There was little more to the letter; mostly it was promises to make amends, and to get back the money he had lost for the DX. It was Gooch all over; good intentions and weak accomplishments. Yet Jim remembered that he himself would now be rotting in an old prospect's hole had it not been for Gooch, and Gooch had died while trying to carry out the good intentions he had formed.

Jim wondered why Gooch had not told him about the hide-out in Thunderbolt Gorge after Gooch had pulled him out of the prospect hole, but it was really not hard to understand. Gooch had been playing his own hand. And he hadn't been quite sure how so much knowledge of the Denton gang's habits and habitats would be received. Or he might have been withholding this information for one big, climatic moment. At any rate it had been withheld.

The Denton gang was responsible for the death of both Gooch and Ted Dysart. Jim had his own score to settle with the outlaw king because of that experience in the prospect hole. Now he knew where Denton was. Now a lot of other things were clear. Gooch himself had never suspected, apparently, that Pig Bratton might be associated with Cy Denton, but now Jim knew that he was. Not only associated, but probably the real leader, with Denton merely a figurehead.

Jim had suspected Bratton for a long time, but there had never been any proof. He had no proof as yet that would stand in a court of law, but plenty to convince himself. There was always the fact that some of his men were active members of the Denton gang, and Bratton was not such a fool as not to suspect them. The fact that Denton had pretended to Gooch that he meant to steal Big Hat cattle and then stole DX cows instead was clear indication that he was acting in Bratton's interest. Bratton wanted to bankrupt the DX and ruin each of the Dysart boys individually besides.

The outlaws could not have used the Big Hat range to cross from Wood Canyon to the dugway pack trail without Bratton knowing something about it. But the most convincing bit of evidence of all, to Jim's mind, was the fact that Bratton had deliberately framed Amos Kittel in order to force him to sell his otherwise non-essential little ranch, because anyone travelling the dugway pack trail had to pass directly in front of the Kittel house in order to reach the end of the trail.

Jim had wondered about that business of the four calves ever since the day when Bratton had ridden up with Ted Dysart and Dave Lant to claim them—just as Jim and Amos had finished branding them. He was sure now that Dave Lant had known there was something crooked there. It was probably the

turning point which had led Lant into joining Tex Devore's posse ; an act which had led to Dave's death.

It was now clear, too, why Bratton and his men had murdered Gooch, and fallaciously claimed that he had tried to escape. They had known that Gooch had too much information about the Denton gang.

A surge of savage joy shot through Jim's body. Now, at last, he would have a chance to come to grips with his enemies. Then his elation faded suddenly.

He dared not make the information public, for some of the gang's spies would surely carry a warning to the outlaws in Thunderbolt Gorge. Only a few close friends could be trusted. But the worst of it was, had he found the letter before Pauline's visit he could have persuaded her not to marry Pig Bratton. He had little doubt that she would be married before he could send word to Star.

CHAPTER XXIII

Perilous Pack Trail

What he would have done had he not found Gooch's letter Jim didn't know, but he was quite sure he would not have given himself up. Now that all his family were dead, and the girl he loved probably married to his worst enemy nothing seemed to matter greatly except the one big job of exposing Pig Bratton and capturing Cy Denton and his outlaws.

There was Polly, of course. Yet long ago Jim had taken out an insurance policy payable to the girl which would care for her as long as she lived, and go a long way toward the support of her mother. Anxious as he was for action he had no choice but to remain in or near the cave until Jeff Teeters returned that night. He kept his horse saddled, and his six-gun buckled to his thigh. If a posse did happen to ferret him out they would get the fight they were looking for.

He didn't look for Jeff before midnight, and it was indeed almost twelve o'clock to the dot when he heard the old puncher cautiously call out, " Jim, be yuh thar ? "

" Come on up," Jim replied. " I want news."

" I got it," Jeff said. " The sheriff has got gangs a-huntin' yuh like hongry coyotes after a lost sheep."

" Anybody send any word ? " Jim asked eagerly.

" Yeh, they did. Pauline an' Gene Partee have been workin' on the county attorney an' the judge. Seems as if somehow they got Pig Bratton an' Senator Cole to help out, too. Anyway, here's a note Pauline sent," Teeters said diffidently.

Jim grimly read the note while Jeff obligingly held a match. " Dear Jim." He noticed that the girl's handwriting was a

little shaky. "Won't you please reconsider about giving yourself up? We have talked with the authorities. In view of the fact that none of the Big Hat cowboys want to testify the judge has promised to dismiss the murder charge at a preliminary hearing provided that you give yourself up by ten o'clock to-morrow morning. Neither will the bribery charges be pressed. The only consequence will be a fine, or maybe a thirty jail sentence for the affront to Deputy Smith's dignity. I can say no more. Please, Jim." It was unsigned.

It was easy to read between the lines. Pig Bratton wanted to marry Pauline. To get her he had used his influence with the county officials. Jim could have his liberty and financial security at the price of the woman he loved.

That ten o'clock deadline meant something, too. It seemed to contain Pauline's ultimatum as well as that of the law. Unless he surrendered she would go ahead and marry Bratton anyway.

He tore the note into little pieces and flung them to the breeze.

" Who's at the ranch ? " he asked.

" Well, Tex an' Amos got in to-night with seventy head of yore cattle. Then there's me an' Harvey."

" Any lawmen ? "

" Not in sight."

" No, they wouldn't be in sight, but the place is probably watched. Jeff, I've got some news, too. I know that Cy Denton and his outlaws are hidin' in Thunderbolt Gorge. I know, too, that if we can catch them it'll come out that Pig Bratton is in with 'em."

" Good Lord ! You know that ? " Jeff blurted. " Then why don't we raise a posse——"

" It's tougher than that," Jim said. " Let the sheriff or any of Bratton's friends hear about it and our birds will be gone. What's more, the old dugway pack trail is the only way in there, an' Denton is certain to keep it guarded where one man could hold off a posse like shootin' tame ducks in a pond."

Jeff's feathers fell. " What kin we do ? " he asked.

" You go back to the ranch, but be careful to come in from the other direction. Tell Tex and the others what I've told you. Tell 'em my information is sure and certain. We've to work in the night, and it's too late to do anything this night.

" I don't know whether I can pull it off or not, but I'm going ahead to-morrow night and try to reach the head of the trail to clear the way for the rest of you."

" You're talkin' crazy talk," Jeff said. " Hell, man, you just got out of a sick bed."

" Don't argue," Jim snapped. " You and Tex ride into town and quietly raise as many men as you absolutely know won't give anything away, and who are able to climb as well as fight. Tell them not to leave Star before midnight. The

best time to hit the outlaws is just at daybreak. And if I'm lucky enough to remove the guards on the trail the job shouldn't be hard."

"We oughta be able to raise ten or twelve good men," Jeff opined.

Jim looked at the old puncher so long that Jeff began to fidget. "Jeff, can you still act like a drunk man without getting soused?" he asked.

"Shore I kin, but what——"

"Then do it. When you get to town let Tex raise the posse an' you pretend to get gloriously drunk. Then kind of let it slip out that I may be hiding in the old empty cabin at the head of Grizzly Meadows where we used to pasture the bulls. Sheriff Sullivan won't lose any time raising a posse to get out there, which will take most of the men who might cause us trouble out of town."

"I'll do my dangdest," Jeff promised.

Jim tried to sleep during the day, but the effort was largely futile. His mind was full of plans which he knew might have to be discarded when the time for action arrived. And after ten o'clock he kept wondering how long it would be before Pauline and Pig Bratton were married.

When the shadows began to deepen after sundown he rode out through the brush-choked dry channel, and chose his course across the timbered foothills back of Star; actually riding within half a mile of the town on his way to what had been Amos Kittel's ranch.

He didn't know who now lived at the ranch a-straddle of the end of the pack trail, but they were sure to be friendly to the outlaws. Tex and his posse would take care of them when they came along but Jim's job was to get past them unseen.

He had just struck the fence when a man raised up in front of him, waving a white rag. Jim's hand went to his gun, but he didn't draw.

"Jim, don't shoot!" the man cried out. "I'm Amos Kittel."

"What the devil are you doin' here?" Jim asked.

"I figgered you'd be along here," Kittel said. "I know a way to git on to the pack trail without passin' the house. 'Course, we'd be in plain sight in the daytime, but at night it oughta be easy."

"That'll sure help," Jim acknowledged. "After you show me you can go back an' wait for the other boys. "They'll be along, won't they?"

"Sure will—ten of 'em, countin' Tex, Jeff an' Harvey. But I won't need to wait for them because I told 'em how to go. All they'll need to do is to look for the gap we'll cut in the fence."

"This job will be dangerous, Amos. You'd better wait for the others."

" I told Tex I'd stay with yuh, an' I mean to stay," the other said stubbornly.

Jim shrugged and surrendered.

Fortunately, it was a dark, starless night. Kittel led the way through a field and stopped twice to cut the wires. They began a short, stiff climb up the mountain, then veered back along the steep hillside directly above Kittel's former home.

" Was daylight they could pick us off like flies on a screen door, but we're too far up to be seen," Kittel said.

When they struck the old pack trail they had travelled a good three miles, but were no more than half a mile above the house, but at least they were now past the first danger post.

The pack trail itself zigzagged back and forth, always climbing up and up so steeply that the horses had to be winded every little while. It had been forty years since that trail had been extensively used. In those old days there had been a mad stampede for gold over that mountain into inaccessible Thunderbolt Gorge, and report had it that nearly a million dollars in gold dust had been brought out over that single pack trail. So well had the old timers built the trail that it was still serviceable.

The most perilous place of all was just before the trail entered a narrow natural cut through a rocky shoulder. Wherever the dugway had been made in soil there had been a number of bad washouts, and the trail always had to bend upwards around them. Jim had been over the trail many times in daylight, and it was bad enough then. In the darkness it was dangerous every moment.

The real danger, however, was not from the trail. The last and by far the biggest washout was little more than a hundred yards from the entrance to the cut. The whole mountainside had slipped away at that particular place, leaving a deep, white scar in the earth visible clear to Star in the daytime. The trail, Jim knew, ran perilously close to the very lip of that landslide. A single mis-step here would mean certain death for man or beast.

If the outlaws, Jim reasoned, had a guard on the pack trail it would be right there in the end of this cut. From that vantage point one man could hold back an army. All the guard would have to do would be to pick off anyone on the trail with a rifle and they would simply drop over the edge of the abyss into eternity. They stopped where the trail veered sharply upward around that landslide.

" We'd better walk and lead our horses, Amos," Jim said. " At least we won't be quite such a target if we get shot at."

The clouds which had darkened the sky had broken away to some extent and it was light enough to see the trail some distance ahead. They didn't know yet whether that was an asset or a liability. Each man's horse had once narrowly escaped slipping off the trail.

"Once we git above the washout we'll have to go on," Kittel said. "Yuh couldn't turn a horse there without a derrick."

Jim went ahead, leading his horse. He wished now that it wasn't so light. He could make up out the beginning of the cut through the rocky shoulder, and see the mountain looming high and unscalable above him. But below was nothing but a black abyss. Once his horse kicked loose a stone, and they heard it finally strike the earth a thousand feet below. Jim dared not look to the left lest he become dizzy.

Both horses were badly frightened, and they led reluctantly; snorting loudly every time they put down a cautious foot.

Sometimes Jim's horse balked altogether, and Kittel would have to rap it on the rump with his bridle reins before it would go on. Do what they would they were making enough noise to rouse a reasonably light sleeper.

Yet Jim knew that one man had just as good a chance to get past a guard at that point as an entire posse. Better, perhaps. It was why he had insisted upon coming ahead of the main body. If he could clear the way for them it didn't matter greatly what happened to him.

They were almost directly above the centre of the landslide, silhouetted plainly against the sky when a shout rang out from the rocks less than a hundred yards ahead.

"Hey!" a voice challenged. "Who comes there?"

CHAPTER XXIV

The Picture in a Trunk

Pauline paced nervously up and down before the window of her room in the Star hotel. It overlooked Main Street, and if Jim Dysart came in to give himself up she would surely see him. It was a quarter past ten and he had not arrived. It was fifteen minutes past the deadline.

She had done all she could, but somehow she had a feeling all along that he wouldn't come. No matter what it meant to two or three helpless women, she thought rather bitterly, his man's pride would not allow him to accept a favour from her, or from his enemy, Pig Bratton. Then, suddenly, she saw six horsemen coming up the street and for a moment she dared to hope. They were from the DX, but Jim wasn't with them. She watched them dismount in front of the Amboy and go in.

She was just reaching for her hat when there came a knock on the door that startled, then sickened her. She was pretty certain who it was. "Come in," she called.

Pig Bratton entered. His round face wore a smile.

"Your friend Dysart didn't show up," he gloated.

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" she asked,

" That's out of my hands now," he shrugged. " Sullivan intends to start searching for him, and we think we can convict him of murder. The chances are he'll be foolish enough to kill somebody resisting arrest, and then he'll certainly hang."

" And that is what you would like," she said.

" Look here, Pauline," Bratton said angrily, " I'm fed up with your damned devotion to Dysart. It's gone a long way past just being childhood chums. Are you in love with that chump or not ? "

" If you must know, Homer," she answered evenly, " I am. But I'm still willing to marry you to make sure that Polly Bryan is provided for, and that Jim has enough money to defend himself."

The man might have been infatuated by her, but there was raw, naked hate in his eyes as he glowered at her.

" So the price has come down a little, eh ? " he sneered. " Well, the transfer of the lease is made out. What're you waiting for ? "

" Nothing, I guess," she said, feeling as if she might be going to have a chill. " I suppose you understand it won't be much of a marriage."

" I can handle that," he replied crisply. " And you."

He looked at his watch. " I'm going to be busy for a while, but I've made arrangements for the wedding to take place at eight this evening at Senator Cole's home. You be there, and wear the white silk wedding gown I've bought for you. I've ordered plenty of refreshments, and a number of my friends will be there. And this time I mean what I say. Either the wedding comes off or I carry on my war till there ain't a Dysart or a friend of theirs left in this country."

It was his hour of triumph. He was paying the price, and he demanded the full taste of victory. He didn't try to hide the vindictiveness of his nature. Pauline was too weary with the whole thing to feel more than passive aversion. If Jim had given himself up so that he could be free she would have felt that her sacrifice had been fully worth while. She felt that Jim had let her down.

" I'd rather get the thing over with now," she said wearily, " but if you want to put on a show I guess it's your right. But I want that lease in my hand fifteen minutes before the ceremony."

" You'll get it," he smirked, and left the room.

The girl felt a strange inertia. She started to go on the street to talk to Jeff Teeters but changed her mind and remained in her room. In her present depressed mood she couldn't stand to visit even Polly Bryan.

She could not, however, keep away from the window. After a time she somehow became conscious of unusual activity on the street. She saw Tex Devore frequently. Sometimes he was with one man, sometimes another. It struck her he was

unusually busy. She saw old man Barnes and his son Willie sitting on the sidewalk eating cheese and crackers. Otherwise they were as immovable as statues. She wondered what they were doing in town.

She hadn't seen old Jeff Teeters since she had seen him enter the Amboy, but at last he emerged, and he was drunk. He staggered across the sidewalk and almost fell in the dust. He careened on down to where the Barnes's sat and took a wide-armed swing at Willie's hat. Willie ducked, and old Jeff fanned the air wildly and sat down heavily in the dirt. He got up, brushed futilely at his clothes and wandered drunkenly down the street to another saloon. When she saw the old man again he was in custody of Deputy Snow Smith.

Less than half hour later Pauline saw a posse ride out of town, led by Sullivan and Smith. There were at least thirty men in that posse, and they rode as if they knew where they were going.

Pauline could stand the strain no longer. She grabbed her hat and descended to the street.

" What's up ? " she asked a woman. " Where is that posse going ? "

" Out after Jim Dysart," the woman replied. " They say one of his men got drunk an' told 'em where he was hidin'. I guess they'll soon have *him* where *he* belongs."

Pauline was amazed at the savagery in the woman's voice. Until recently Jim had always been popular in this range town. Now everyone, it seemed, was ready to turn against him. His two brothers had been killed, and rumour said that they were outlaws. That of itself was enough to brand Jim. His spectacular escape from a sick bed had only added to the popular belief that he, too, had gone to the bad. Somehow, Marr Bradley, the sneak who had murdered Gooch Dysart and was responsible for the death of Dave Lant, had now become a martyr.

She saw Tex Devore and Gene Partee crossing the street and started to intercept them. Before she reached them old Jeff Teeters turned a corner and drunkenly sought to speak to them. Then Tex gave the old puncher a shove or a blow and once more old Jeff went down in the dirt. Partee kicked at him viciously, but missed. The two men hurried on and old Jeff got slowly to his feet and looked around vaguely. Then he saw Pauline and made for her, zigzagging drunkenly as he came.

" I didn't mean to shush—shush—shay where J—Jim wash hidin' out," he quavered. " You unnerstan', don' yuh, Paulie ? "

" Of course I do, Jeff," she murmured, pityingly.

" You wanted him to give himself up, didn' yuh, Paulie ? "

" Yes, I did. I can't see why he didn't."

The old puncher was pawing at her as if to seek support to

hold himself up. He had her by the shoulders in an unexpectedly strong grip. She hadn't the heart to fight him away, although people were looking at them curiously, and some were laughing.

" I heard Pig Bratton say the reason he wouldn't join the posse was because he was gettin' married to-night," Jeff said in an undertone which only she could hear. " Jim will kill me for this, but you mustn't marry Bratton—Oh, but I'm drunk, Paulie. You wouldn't sock an ol' soak, would yuh, Paulie ? "

" You need some help there, Miss Lant ? "

Pauline saw the principal of the public school a few feet away. She hadn't recovered from the shock of discovering that old Jeff was only simulating drunkenness, but she replied quickly, " No, thank you. I know this man. I'll get him to lie down some place."

" If you need——" the man persisted.

" Go on, 'fore I take a sock at yuh," old Jeff threatened. " Can't yuh shee the la—lady don' wanta be annoyed."

Pauline smiled deprecatingly and waved the schoolmaster away. Then she gravely piloted Teeters down the street.

" Jeff, what is this ? " she whispered. " I saw Tex knock you down."

" Yuh saw that posse go hell-tearin' outa town on a wild-goose chase, too, didn't you ? " he retorted.

" Then you didn't tell them where Jim is."

" No. I ain't got time to tell you much, an' Jim made me promise not to tell you nothin', but I had to after I heard Bratton say what he did."

" But what——"

" All I can tell you is this. Jim found a letter from Gooch that told where Cy Denton's hideout is, an' we're goin' after him with a few men we know we kin trust. That's why we had to get the wrong ones out of town."

" Where is the ——"

" Can't tell you that, Paulie," Jeff said stubbornly. " But just one thing more. We know now that Pig Bratton has been in with Cy Denton all the time, an' if our plans don't go wrong we'll dang soon be able to prove it. I'll set down here now, an' you go on."

He lurched drunkenly toward the tongue of a wagon on the camping lot they had turned into : missed it enough to fall completely over it and go sprawling. He drew himself up haughtily and waved her away.

Pauline didn't know what to do. Her head whirled because of the things she had just heard. Old Jeff wasn't lying. Two things began to crystallize. Jim was going to be in dreadful danger if he went after Cy Denton, particularly hurt as he was. And Jeff had said that Pig Bratton and Cy Denton were accomplices.

She had never been under the slightest illusion with regard

to Bratton's cruelty and greed, but not once had it occurred to her that he might himself be an outlaw. But now she realized that the thing which had blinded her, and others was the fact that he was a prosperous business man. A man like that, people naturally thought, would not jeopardize his career by dabbling in crime. But even Pig hadn't claimed that he had always been prosperous.

Was it possible, she thought with a shudder of dismay, that her father had known the truth, and that he had gone out ahead of that posse hoping to meet the death which would set her free from any obligation to marry Bratton ?

What was she going to do now ? If Jeff had been telling the truth then Pig Bratton was a murderer—an inhuman monster. No possible regard for the welfare of others should require her to marry such a man.

She had to know. It would do her no good to ask Tex or Partee. They would be afraid she might interfere with their plans. There was no use trying to think things out. She had to have action.

As unobtrusively as she could she got her horse from the livery stable and rode slowly out of town. Once certain that she was not followed she put the animal to a gallop and held that gait until she drew up at the gate of the Big Hat ranch.

Young Carl Vare, one of the tough Big Hat punchers, was shoeing a horse. He let the animal's foot down and stared at her. She forced herself to wave at him gaily. He waved back and resumed his work.

The old deaf housekeeper was in the kitchen. She had always ignored Pauline more or less, and now she only nodded gloomily and went on with her work.

Pauline started toward the room that had been her own, but at the foot of the stairs she stopped, and finding herself unobserved, entered the large front bedroom which Pig Bratton had always reserved to himself. She closed the door hastily, then after a moment in which to screw up her resolution she began to go through his papers.

Pig Bratton had carried on a rather voluminous correspondence but the girl could find nothing to indicate that he had a criminal record. In one of the drawers she found a sheriff's poster containing the picture of a round-faced man with a shaven head, and a number on his prison stripes. Underneath were the words :

CY DENTON

> $500.00 reward will be paid for the apprehension of this man, dead or alive. Take no chances. He is always armed and will shoot without notice.

Pauline studied the picture a moment then placed it on the

desk. This was the first time she had ever seen his picture, but she knew she had once seen him with Gooch and Ted Dysart.

Bratton's papers produced no clue to anything that could be used against him. Pauline bit her lip in perplexity and glanced around the room. She walked over and tried the lid to a trunk in one corner. It was unlocked. The top compartment contained just such articles as a man in Pig's position could be expected to have. After some hesitation she lifted out the compartment and explored the bottom part of the trunk.

There wan't much there; certainly nothing that looked incriminating. She moved a fine Navajo blanket and so uncovered a number of photographs. She shuffled them incuriously, then suddenly picked one up and gave a little involuntary cry of astonishment.

It was a picture of two round-faced, solidly built young men. One of them was indubitably Pig Bratton. The other was just as surely the same face as that in the picture she had left lying upon the desk—Cy Denton! Pauline turned the picture over, and written upon the back in a feminine hand were these words:

"The Bratton boys. Cyrus, 25. Homer, 22."

She carried the photograph over to the desk and compared the faces. There could be no doubt—Pig Bratton and Cy Denton were brothers. So absorbed and excited was she that she didn't hear the door open. But she did hear a cold, steely voice dryly inquiring, "You looking for something, my dear?"

The man standing there was Pig Bratton.

CHAPTER XXV

Double Shock

They stood about as much chance of survival as a man on the scaffold with a rope around his neck.

Jim had to think fast. He had to bluff.

"Hold your fire," he shouted, disguising his voice as much as possible. Then added hurriedly in an undertone to Amos Kittel, "Stay down. If they get me go back and tell the posse."

"Who are you?" came the challenging voice from the rocks.

"Pig Bratton sent me," Jim replied confidently. That was as likely to get him in as anything. And if they let him come on it would be final proof that Bratton was a Denton man.

"Yeah?" The voice reeked scepticism. "What's your name? Who's with you?"

All the time Jim was slowly walking forward, leaving his

horse standing in the trail. He had to name one of the Big Hat punchers. "I'm Bert Latch," he said, "an' there's nobody with me."

"Come on then," the voice said.

Something in the tone of that voice carried mockery. Jim felt it, but he had to go on; had to keep walking, knowing that any instant he might get a bullet full in the chest.

He kept his hat pulled low over his eyes, and he carried his six-gun, not in his hand or holster, but stuck under the waistband of his trousers where he could reach it as quickly as he could raise his hand.

He could see nothing ahead but rocks. The sentinel was keeping himself well covered. He reached the end of the narrow cut through the rocks, and stopped.

"Keep walkin'," a voice grated from ten feet away. Jim could see no one. There was nothing to shoot at but black rock. But the guard could see him. He walked on, realizing full well the devilish strategy of his enemy. Three steps more and his back would be presented to the man. His brain had never worked so fast. He knew now that he hadn't a chance in the world. The fastest gunman on earth couldn't shoot an unseen foe who had the drop on him. He had guessed, however, that the sentinel was alone. If he surrendered without a fight the man might leave the trail unguarded long enough to conduct him to the outlaw camp. As yet the man had given no indication that he even suspected the presence of another man. Tex Devore and his men might just possibly be able to reach the top of the pack trail before the guard got back.

He took three steps, and the guard called, "Halt! Drop your gun."

Jim let the six-gun clatter on the rocks.

"Now walk away from it."

Jim walked on until ordered to stop. He could hear the man clambering out from his hiding-place. The outlaw picked up the gun. Had Jim not been wounded he would have taken a desperate chance and flung himself upon the fellow, but weakened as he was he would have no chance. He felt a gun bore against his spine. "Anybody with you, Dysart?" the man asked.

He had been recognized! "Hell, no," he replied. "Just my two horses. I figured Thunderbolt Gorge would be a good hideout. Looks like somebody has beat me to it."

"Figgered on stayin' awhile, hunh?" the outlaw taunted. "I got an idee yore stay'll be brief. Won't nobody haul yuh out of a prospect hole this time."

There followed several moments of silence; minutes which Jim Dysart knew might decide the fate of a number of people. Quite plainly the outlaw was puzzled about the two horses he could see limned on the sky-line. If he had suspected the presence of a second man he didn't know what to do about it.

If he walked out to get the animals he would have to bind his prisoner. If there was a man there he himself might walk into a bullet. His choice, then, was to stay where he was until relieved, knowing he could hold the trail, or leave it unguarded while he took the prisoner to camp.

" There's a coupla fellers gonna be mighty eager to see you, Dysart," he said. " It ain't fur to the top o' the divide from here. Start climbin'."

Jim walked on slowly. It was perhaps five hundred feet through the defile, and from there he knew the trail simply wound around the mountain perhaps another half-mile to the top. The outlaw's horse was tied where the trail emerged from the rocks.

" Hey, Bill ! " the outlaw called loudly as he swung on to his horse, " I'm takin' this bird to the hump. You watch the trail, an' shoot anybody who shows his noggin'."

That order to a non-existent Bill was the outlaw's final precaution against the possibility that there was another man. Whether or not it would fool Amos Kittel Jim didn't know.

In his weakened condition that half-mile climb to the summit was for Jim pure torture, and his captor kept prodding him on. It was a considerable distance down the other side to the old placer diggings. Jim's hopes died when the outlaw ordered him to sit down, then raised his rifle and fired three quick shots which bellowed and rumbled from ridge to ridge.

In no time at all, it seemed, five horsemen rode out of the darkness. One of them was Cy Denton. Another Jim recognized was Bill Thayne, the Big Hat puncher to whom he owed his wound. " What's up, Hauser ? " the outlaw chief queried.

" Look what I done caught," Jim's captor said. " Jim Dysart. Tryin' to sneak over the hump."

" Well, I'll be—Dysart, hunh ? " Denton chuckled. " Well, I'm right proud to meet you again, Dysart. But say, how did you know we were in here ? "

" Hell, I didn't," Jim snapped. " I happen to be hidin' from the law an' I figgered this would be a good place."

" You ain't so dumb at that," Denton said. " What happened to your horses ? "

" I left 'em just above the big washout and your man here was afraid to go back after 'em."

The outlaw Hauser hastily explained his reasons for not going after the horses. Hauser, Jim remembered, was the bushwhacker who had murdered Dave Lant and Pee-wee.

" Well, go back an' git 'em," Denton directed. " Let's see : It'll soon be time for you to come in so Speed an' Wing can go with you an' stay on guard till noon. Thayne, you an' Grubb will go back with me. Help Dysart on behind you, Grubb."

Jim found himself mounted behind a board-backed stolid looking outlaw. It was better than being driven on foot like

a beast. He had little hope now that Tex and his men would reach the cut before the outlaws got back. Even if by some miracle they could the issue would still be in doubt. Getting into Thunderbolt Gorge was one thing, getting the outlaws out was another.

On that side of the mountain the trail ran through heavy pine timber. It made a swift descent to the bottom of a steep canyon where still remained a few buildings from the days of the old gold boom. Farther down the gorge narrowed and steepened until at the bottom there was room only for the swift-running white water which boomed and cascaded its way over slippery rocks where no man could pass.

They passed through what must once have been a street, although nothing remained of the old cabins except tumbled-down heaps of rotten wood. They stopped suddenly in front of a freshly roofed dugout. Already it was beginning to get light, and Jim saw a second dugout beside the first, and another one directly across the canyon.

Unless the posse had got through the cut by this time Jim knew that they would never be able to force their way in. There might be some secret trail into Thunderbolt Gorge from the other direction, but if so he didn't know of it. And anyway it would take the posse a week to get around to that side through wild mountain chasms.

Without dismounting Cy Denton rose in his stirrups and yelled, " Hey, Homer, come out an' see what I've got."

The door to the first dugout opened, and Jim emitted a gasp of sheer astonishment. The man who emerged was Pig Bratton!

For an instant Bratton was only a little less amazed than Jim. Then a look of satanic glee overspread his features.

" Dysart! " he exclaimed. " Oh, happy day! Climb down, Jim. We've got somebody else here I'm sure you'll like to meet."

Jim was all but knocked off the horse by the man Grubb's strong right elbow. The others dismounted also, and stood in a grinning circle. Two other men emerged from the opposite dugout. Jim was discomfited to see that one of them was Bert Latch, the man he had tried to impersonate. No wonder Hauser hadn't been fooled, he thought disgustedly.

Meanwhile, Pig Bratton stepped over to the second dugout, and after fussing for a moment with a bar and a chain opened the door.

" Come out, my dear," he invited sardonically. " We've got a visitor."

Pauline Lant stepped out of the dugout.

CHAPTER XXVI

The Supreme Gamble

The girl gave Jim one tragic, despairing look, but didn't speak. There was no speech in Jim either. The one thing he had not expected was to find Pig Bratton here, and Pauline's presence was twice as amazing. "I thought you two knew each other," Pig taunted. "Aren't you on speaking terms ?"

"I discovered yesterday that Pig Bratton and Cy Denton are brothers," Pauline spoke calmly. "I was careless enough to let Pig catch me with the evidence."

She had told him everything. Somehow, he wasn't greatly surprised.

"Then you're not married to that *hog* ?" he queried as calmly as she had spoken.

"No."

Bratton flushed with anger. In his egotistical way he had been rather proud to be called "Pig," but it got under his skin to be called "Hog."

"It's too bad she ain't," he snapped. "I might be able to do something for you, and at least we wouldn't have to bump her off, too."

"That would be pretty raw even for you," Jim said.

"You don't think we would give up the good thing we got here to save somebody's neck, do you ?" Pig jeered. "Pauline had her chance, and so did you. Neither of you had the sense to take it, so now you take the consequences."

"And I say the sooner we get it over the better," Cy Denton interjected.

"I want 'em to ponder this," Pig smiled devilishly. "As Homer Bratton, first-class citizen, with never a blot on the escutcheon, I will be as I am now, the leading citizen of Lehi Valley. When I see fit I'll retire old man Cole and go to the state senate. From there it's only a step to the governor's chair. My brother and these other boys here, instead of being hunted like coyotes, will have money enough to start their own spreads where they're not known. We've planned for that ever since I persuaded Cy here to start me up in business."

"You may be a good business man, but you talk too damn much," Denton growled.

"And completely through his hat," Jim added.

"Oh, no," Pig smiled. "I'm not easy scared. Nobody but you two have the faintest idea who and what I am, and neither of you will tell."

"Be a little hard explaining how the girl you claimed you were going to marry came to disappear, won't it ?"

"Not in the least, Dysart. My man Vare has already explained that Pauline and I decided to elope. I stay here two, maybe three weeks—on my honeymoon, of course. When I come back I explain that my wife has gone east to visit school friends for a few months. I will get letters. That can be arranged easily. Eventually I give out the story that my wife has basely run away with another man. It may even be you, Dysart. Naturally no one will be surprised that she never comes back here."

It was a fiendish but clever scheme. Had things been as the outlaws thought it would surely have worked. Pauline's face was white, but she stood without a tremor. Jim thought she had never been so beautiful as now.

The outlaws would be in for a surprise when the posse came, but that didn't lessen the girl and Jim's danger. It might not even interfere with Bratton's plans if the outlaws had a secret trail out. Tex and the others had no real proof that Bratton was an outlaw, and certainly they would never guess that he was Cy Denton's brother.

"If you're goin' to knock 'em off be gittin' at it," Denton growled.

"Bring 'em down here to the head of the rapids," Pig ordered.

"You—mean—to—to let 'em go down—the—gorge?" Bill Thayne stammered.

"Why not?" Bratton snapped crisply. "Their bodies will never be found, and if they are they won't be recognizable. They wouldn't get half as much real pounding going over Shoshone Falls."

They were hustled down to the head of what looked like a long, white chute where the creek made the first of a series of swift descents. Jim observed that for the two hundred or more feet of its length there were no jagged rocks in view. There was a churning crater at the bottom, then the creek sideslipped around a rocky point and continued its wild cascading course.

"Which goes first?" Denton asked callously.

"Please," Pauline pleaded, "let us go together."

"All right," Bratton grated. "You shoot her, Cy, and I'll take care——"

He stopped abruptly with his gun in his hand as the distant sound of a rifle shot echoed over the canyon. It was followed by two others in rapid succession. The outlaws were all looking up the canyon.

"There's trouble on the trail," Denton yelled.

For one brief moment the prisoners were unguarded. Jim knew that they had but one chance—and that but a thousand to one shot. He made a long, swift leap, seized Pauline around the waist, and flung himself headlong into the water chute, taking the girl with him.

They were caught and whisked out of sight instantly. Jim had never felt such sensation of speed as he did now. He knew only that his arms were tight about Pauline, and her arms were around him.

He felt himself plunging downward until it seemed his lungs would burst. Then the pressure diminished, his head shot out of the water, and he gulped air into his burning lungs even as he fought desperately to get Pauline's head above water.

He saw her face for an instant, then both of them were sucked under again. He knew they were struggling in the eddy at the foot of the chute. They could cling together no longer. He let go the girl and fought desperately with arms and legs to get out of the maelstrom.

Suddenly the current clutched him again, and he was flung bodily against the rocky point, but he retained consciousness. His groping fingers slid over smooth, slippery rock, and then he was being hurled down stream again at express train speed in another silvery chute.

There was no eddy at the foot of this one. Instead, the stream widened out from six to twenty feet wide, where jagged black boulders stuck up above the white water. Jim knew he couldn't stand being hurled against one of those boulders. His shoulder grazed one, then he was flung madly to one side and narrowly avoided another. But the water was shallower now, its momentum decreased. He couldn't stop, but he could keep his head above water. He saw Pauline's face above the water for an instant just behind him, and then she disappeared.

The boulders were thicker now. He clawed at them desperately. Right below him the creek plunged into a series of chutes and abrupt falls far more deadly than the ones they had just traversed. If they didn't check themselves in the next twenty feet they would be ground to pieces.

Jim struck a boulder with his shoulder and for a moment was caught in a cross current. He rolled over and clutched wildly at a jutting spire of a half-submerged rock and it fitted into his hand like the handle of an axe. He was swung about, pummelled by the current, but he held on. Then something whirled by him and he grabbed desperately with his free hand. He caught Pauline's wrist.

For a moment the tendons of Jim's arms stretched like rubber. He thought he was going to be wrenched from the rock. He could have let the girl go and saved himself, but if one went they would both go, he resolved grimly. The first shock passed. Pauline was not unconscious. Now she caught his wrist with her free hand. Then, abruptly, the pull on his arm ceased, or nearly so.

It was a moment before he realized that Pauline had managed to brace her feet against another boulder. It was a minute before either of them felt able to move. The icy mountain

water seethed over and around them. Then Jim felt Pauline transferring her grip from his arm to his belt.

"Now let go of me, and use both hands," she called.

Jim released her wrist and clutched the rock with both hands, then he drew himself up until he could get both arms around it. He squirmed his way around then until Pauline could grasp it, too, and presently they were on the upper side of the boulder with feet and hands braced.

"That," he panted, "was what might be called a close shave."

"And who," she reminded him, "is going to pull us to shore?"

Jim sized up the situation. The water around them was scarcely knee-deep, but swift enough to sweep them off their feet. Other boulders projected above the water, but mostly they looked round and slick. Then he saw something which brought a gleam of hope to his eyes. A few feet to his left was the end of a small pine log sticking past a black boulder. The other end of it was caught somehow against the bank. If he could reach that log, and it held——

He pointed it out to Pauline. "It's our only chance, kid," he told her. "I'm going to jump for it. If I miss, well——"

"Then I'll be seein' you," she said with a courage that made him want to kiss her.

He got his feet braced as well as he could on top of the boulder, hands and feet almost touching, then launched himself like a football tackler. He struck the water, felt again the demoniac clutch of the current as he turned over on his back and raised his arms high.

The log caught him right under the armpits, and to his supreme joy it felt as firmly lodged as the boulders themselves. He hung there a moment then slowly drew up his legs and straddled the log. He would never forget the look on Pauline's face, even though it was framed with wet, bedraggled hair.

He wrapped his legs firmly around the log, then shouted, "All right, old girl. Jump like you never jumped before. I'll catch you."

She nodded, raised up as he had done, and flung herself at the water. Jim's heart sank as he saw her foot slip as she leaped. If he missed her he would let go the log and go over the falls with her.

She couldn't possibly have caught the log, but Jim flung himself far over and seized the collar of her jacket. A moment later he had pulled her in above the log; then clinging tightly, they worked their way along the log to the narrow bank and drew themselves up on dry land.

For some time they were too exhausted to do anything except lie there with their arms around each other. Once Pauline moved and her lips found Jim's.

Suddenly he saw a frightened look come into her eyes. She

was looking at his shirt. "Your wound," she cried. "It's bleeding."

"Kind of took a batterin' when I hit that log," he said. "Good old log. I'll be all right when I rest a little more."

"What do we do then?" she asked.

"We'll figger," he replied.

For the time being they didn't need to worry about the outlaws. Undoubtedly the men believed they were dead. They wouldn't try to get down the gorge to see. As Jim looked up at the bleak black walls of the gorge and the ribbon of white water at the bottom he wondered just how they were going to get back, but he felt there would be some way. They *had* to get out.

"Jim, there was a posse, wasn't there?" she asked. "Jeff wasn't supposed to tell me, but he did. Do you think they'll be able——"

"They'll get in some way," he said more optimistically than he felt. "And I've got to get back up there to take a hand in it."

"But you haven't got a gun," she objected.

"I'll get one."

The sooner he got up to the dugouts the better. It was probable that all the men had rushed back to the divide to stand off the posse, but he couldn't be sure of that. His strength had come back to some extent and he got to his feet.

The walls above them rose sheer. They had to pick their way carefully along the sloping, narrow bank. One mis-step and they would be back in the current from which they had so narrowly escaped. They both sank down to rest when at last they reached a wider place at the head of the second chute.

There had been an ancient landslide there, and the receding slope was covered with brush and scrub trees. Climbing that would be comparatively easy. They soon found themselves up in the big timber above the dugouts, and here they found a trail.

They were now far enough from the water to be able to hear something besides its petulant roar. They paused to listen.

"That sounds like firing," Pauline said.

"Yeah, but it's on the other side of the divide," Jim said gloomily. If the outlaws held the pack trail they would continue to hold it for a long time.

"I wonder where this trail leads to?" Pauline murmured.

Jim gave a start. "If they've got a back door," he said, "this must be it. It can't go on down the gorge and the old pack trail is on the other side of the canyon. Listen, Paul: you stay here while I go down to the dugouts. If I can find a rifle——"

"I'll go with you," she declared firmly.

Jim looked at her and grinned. "After the ride we just took maybe we'd better stick togeth——"

" Listen ! " she interrupted in a whisper. " Jim, someone's coming along this trail ! "

" And me without a gun," he said bitterly. He could hear a horseman coming along the trail, and not fifty yards distant. Only the trees on both sides of the trail kept them from seeing who it was, and temporarily screened them.

" Up the bank," he whispered, " and hide behind a tree." He gave her a hand, then scrambled up himself. They had no time to look for a real hiding-place. Jim moulded himself behind the first tree, and Pauline got behind another one a few feet back. Both were pitifully inadequate.

They had scarcely availed themselves of their scanty shelter when the horseman loomed in view not fifty feet distant. The man was Pig Bratton !

Whatever happened Bratton was saving his own skin. There was a secret trail out of Thunderbolt Gorge and he was taking it.

CHAPTER XXVII

The Gorge of Death

Jim was weakened from a bad wound, and he had just been through an ordeal which would have drained the stamina from a well man ; but as he saw the hated face of his enemy he knew that he wan't going to let Bratton ride out unscathed so long as he had strength to raise an arm.

He waited tensely as the man drew abreast. So unconcerned was Pig that he was humming a little tune under his breath. Then, just as he came even with Jim he jerked his mount to a halt.

" Footprints ! " he ejaculated. " What the——"

Jim sprang as Bratton looked upward. Pig's grab for his gun was too late, as Jim landed on top of him. The horse was dragged off the trail by the combined weight of the two men as Pig was knocked out of the saddle. Pauline screamed as she saw both men on the ground and under the horse.

This, she realized, was no time for hysterics. Jim was unarmed and wounded, and weak as he was she knew he would have no chance whatever in a free-for-all with Pig Bratton. It was up to her.

She saw the horse whirl and scramble back on the trail, and her eyes rested upon the carbine in the scabbard. " Whoa ! " she cried out, and leaped for the bridle.

The horse broke into a gallop, and swept on past the dugout on that side of the gorge before the girl could scramble into saddle and grasp the reins. She pulled the animal to a halt, jerked the carbine from the scabbard, and bring the plunging animal under control, galloped back toward the fighting men

with an unvoiced prayer that she would not be too late.

The men had wrestled and tumbled a hundred feet below the trail. They were on a steep slope, and directly above a far sharper incline right down to the first deadly chute into which Jim and Pauline had but recently plunged!

The outlaw at first concentrated upon drawing his six-gun, but Jim's attack was pressed too fiercely to give him time. Jim knew that his one chance was to keep the man occupied and off balance. Each time Pig got free and tried to draw his weapon Jim lunged into him again, and each time the lunge took them closer and closer to the edge of the precipitous slope above the roaring cataract of Thunderbolt Gorge.

They broke apart, and Pig's hand dropped toward his gun. Again Jim lunged, but this time Pig seized hold on a small sapling and swung himself sideways in time to avoid the lunge. Jim's wild plunge carried him to within four feet of the abrupt bank. He could see the white water far below as he, too, grasped at a sapling and swung himself around.

Now, for the first time, Bratton was above him, and Jim couldn't lunge up-hill. He was spent. Not Bratton, but his weakened condition had whipped him. He clung to the sapling for a moment as he saw Bratton's six-gun coming up.

The reverberation of Pig's shot had not ceased when it was drowned by the louder report of the carbine as Pauline fired.

Jim saw Pig Bratton apparently start for him, then suddenly stumble. The man lunged headlong in a sprawling fall, Jim saw him try desperately to check himself on the edge of the bank, but his momentum was too great. Pig gave one ungodly scream, and then he was tumbling end over end down the bank. The body slid into the second chute and disappeared. Pig Bratton would never be seen again.

Pauline came down the slope so recklessly that Jim yelled a warning lest she, too, be carried over the rim by the momentum of her rush. Tears were streaming down her face.

"Jim!" she cried. "I—I—killed him."

They both clung to the sapling and to each other.

Jim soothed her as best he could. He told her she had saved his life.

"I know. I'm glad I killed him, but it—it was horrible. I—I never shot a man before."

"And," Jim said quietly, "you didn't shoot this one."

"I—didn't?"

Jim pointed to a fresh bullet scar a good foot above where Bratton's head had been. "You shot over him," he explained, then pointed down. "See that little chaparral bush? Your shot startled him. He jumped away from the tree, caught his toe in that tangled bush and tripped. The fall simply took him over the edge and gravity did the rest."

"I'm glad I didn't hit him," she said, and added truthfully, "but I tried to."

" Pig wasn't as lucky as we were. He won't come back," he stated sombrely.

Jim took the rifle from her hands and they climbed back to the trail. While he rested she caught the horse again and brought it back.

Jim had been listening. The firing on the divide had somehow changed. At first it had been on the other side, but now the shots were clearer, more distinct. It dawned upon him suddenly that somehow the posse had got past the cut and were fighting the outlaws on top of the ridge.

" I've got to get into it," he said, as he reached for the bridle reins. " You stay in the dugout."

" Jim, no," she cried. " You've been through enough. I won't let you go. Anyway, look: This is their way out. They'll try to escape this way soon, and with that rifle we can hold them back."

Jim glanced at her with admiration. Her strategy was sounder than his would have been. " Come on," he said. " Let's have a look at that dugout."

This was the building across the creek from where Pauline had been imprisoned the night before. It was none too clean when they entered it, but they scarcely noticed.

" Look! " Jim exclaimed. " Loop-holes."

A single trail ran down to the creek over which a sturdy log bridge had been built. The loop-holes in the front of the dugout commanded a clear view of that bridge, and the timbered slope above. Even one man could hold back a posse here, and if finally driven out there still remained the back trail which Pig Bratton had been trying to take.

Jim saw Pauline scrambling down the trail to the bridge. He called to her, but she only waved and kept on. She entered the first dugout, and presently emerged with a weapon in her hand. When she got back she triumphantly displayed Jim's own six-gun.

" We may need this," she said. " I'm a better shot with that than I am with a rifle."

" Paul," he said, " we've got a lot to talk about, but right now there ain't time to say much more than that I want you to marry me."

"Oh, Jim, I can't," she cried. "Not—not with Polly. I love you, but I couldn't do that to her, even if she did ask me to marry you."

" She did that? "

Pauline nodded. " I'm afraid we're poor actors. I think she knows how we both feel."

" I know she does. She's a wonderful girl, Paul. I know she'll say she wants us to get married right away, but I'd rather wait. It won't be long."

" What do you mean? "

He told her what Dr. Wilkerson had said. "A year at the very longest."

"I'm sorry," Pauline said. "I really am. A year isn't long. We'll wait as long as it is necessary."

Jim took his eyes away from a loop-hole long enough to kiss her. When he looked again a horseman was trotting out of the timber. This time it was Cy Denton, or Cy Bratton as they now knew his real name to be.

"Leavin' his men up there to hold back the posse while he does a sneak," Jim said grimly. "That outlaw is due for a surprise."

Denton headed straight for the bridge, not drawing his horse to a walk until he had reached the creek bank. Jim took the six-gun from the girl's hand and stepped to the open door as soon as Denton crossed the bridge. But twenty yards separated them.

"Hold it, Denton," Jim called. "You're covered."

Jim's gun pointed at the outlaw, and Pauline waggled the barrel of Pig's rifle through a loop-hole, then steadied it.

Denton made no attempt to draw. He stopped his horse automatically, and his mouth hung open like an idiot's. Had he seen two people rise from the grave he could have been no more astounded. He had seen them commit what he thought to be suicide, yet here they were, their clothes scarcely dry from their plunge into Thunderbolt creek. He turned his head and looked back at the creek as though blaming it for its treachery.

"Pig didn't get away either," Jim said. "He went down the gorge, but *he* won't come back."

They saw Denton stick out his tongue to wet his dry lips.

"Get off and drop your gun, Denton," Jim ordered. "Your jig is up."

"Yeah ?" the outlaw got out finally. "Well, no damned law is goin' to hang me."

He struck his mount with both spurs, and at the same time jerked savagely on the reins. His intention was to whirl the horse around and use its body as a shield while he dived for the protection of the bank. But he jerked too hard. Instead of turning the horse reared high, and went over backward. Man and beast struck the water with a terrific splash and were carried instantly into the chute as though shot out of a cannon.

Jim knew that Denton had failed to get his feet out of the stirrups. He had even less chance to escape death than his brother had had.

The rifle still stuck out of the loop-hole, but Pauline leaned against a wall with her hands over her eyes. Jim was himself shaken, yet filled with vast relief. The Bratton brothers had literally gone down the flume—and they would not come back.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A Couple of Contracts

There was little time to wait before the remainder of the outlaws raced into sight. They, too, were heading for the back trail and the secret way out. The first man in sight was Hauser. Jim remembered Dave Lant and Pee-wee as he pulled trigger. His shot struck the man squarely in the breast. Hauser soared through the air like a gigantic frog. Jim's next shot killed Bill Thayne's horse, and the rider failed to get free.

Pauline, too, peppered away with the six-gun. The remaining outlaws, utterly dismayed to find their retreat cut off, and themselves abandoned by their leaders, started to turn back; but pursuit was hot on their heels. They milled for a minute or so, then raised their hands high and wildly yelled for mercy.

Tex Devore led his posse down to the dugouts after the outlaws were disarmed. He was flanked by Jeff Teeters and Amos Kittel. They were as amazed to see Pauline as Jim Dysart has been. "We expected to find Jim dead or a prisoner, but we sure wasn't lookin' for you, ma'am," Tex said. "Is any of these buzzards Cy Denton?"

"No," Jim said, "and I don't think they need to feel too bad when they find out the Bratton brothers are somewhere in Thunderbolt Gorge."

"The Bratton brothers?" Tex exclaimed. "Yuh mean Pig had a brother?"

"Cy Denton. Pauline found it out. That's why they brought her up here. But how did you fellows manage to get through the cut?"

"Simple," Tex said. "Amos Kittel here held it for us."

"After they got you I went on into the cut an' held them outlaws off till the boys got here," Kittel said with justifiable pride. "Then, while they was pepperin' us from above, Tex an' Jeff got down into a draw an' then sneaked back up above 'em. That kinda routed 'em out."

Each man had his individual story to tell, but they faded into insignificance beside Jim and Pauline's miraculous escape from Thunderbolt Gorge.

The entire party, prisoners and all, reached Star just before sundown, but one rider had been sent on ahead to report to old Gene Partee and break the news.

The old cattleman was waiting to greet them with a broad grin. It was already known by all the town that Cy Denton had been killed and his entire gang captured, but the populace waited eagerly to learn the truth about Pig Bratton. Few of them had been willing to believe the messenger.

"What pleases me," Gene Partee told Jim, Pauline and their

intimate friends a little later, " is that the Denton gang was wiped out while the sheriff an' his posse were out huntin' Jim at the other end o' the county. That whole rotten click will be laughed right out of office."

" But won't they still try to arrest Jim ? " Pauline asked anxiously.

" They'd be mobbed if they tried it," Partee chuckled.

" Then if I don't have to go to jail, I think I'll go home," Jim told them.

Dr. Wilkerson had joined the group. "Not to-night, my friend," he said, " remember you escaped from me as well as the law, and I'm putting you right back to bed—for a couple of days."

Jim was resting between clean white sheets the next morning when Pauline and Gene Partee came to see him. Pauline looked beautiful to him. Apparently she had suffered no ill effects from her adventure. If Partee hadn't been present he would have kissed her. The conversation soon lagged.

" Well, it looks to me like three was a crowd," Partee grinned at last. " Reckon I'll be going. Thought maybe, though, you'd like to know, Jim, that I've talked with a lawyer about that Grizzly Meadows lease."

" Yes ? What did he say ? " Jim asked eagerly.

" It's kinda complicated, but it can be worked out this way," the old cowman said with a twinkle. " Now Bratton is dead I'll have to take over the Big Hat to protect my interests, him not havin' paid me. That's includin' the lease. The stickler is I've retired. I don't want back in the cow business, an' Tex he wants to go back to his farm."

" Well," Jim queried.

" In one way Bratton was right," Partee exploded. " The Big Hat an' the DX oughta be one outfit. If Bratton could make it pay you can, and the only dang way you'll ever git that lease now is to buy out the Big Hat. I'll give you all the time you want—on one condition."

" What is that ? " Jim and Pauline blurted out together.

" That the pair of you sign the contract, as man an' wife."

" Sorry," Jim said flatly, " but it can't be done—now. You see——"

" Want to make Polly happy, don't you ? " the old man snapped.

" Yes, of course. That's why——"

" Then git married. That's what she wants. I've talked to her. She knows she's only got a little while to live, and she says that's the one thing she wants. If you won't do that much to make her happy I'll shoot you both."

" He's right, Jim," Pauline said with tears in her eyes. " I stayed with Polly last night. She says we insult her by thinking she is selfish."

" All right, Mr. Partee," Jim said, " I guess you've made a deal."

THE END